Stupid

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/30809885.

Rating:
Teen And Up Audiences

Archive Warning:
No Archive Warnings Apply

Categories:
F/M, M/M

Fandom:
Dead Poets Society (1989)

Relationships:
Todd Anderson/Neil Perry, Chris Noel/Knox Overstreet, Steven Meeks/Gerard Pitts (Besties), Charlie Dalton/Knox Overstreet, Neil Perry (Dead Poets Society)/Original Female Character(s)

Characters:
Todd Anderson, Charlie Dalton, Richard Cameron, Neil Perry (Dead Poets Society), Knox Overstreet, Gerard Pitts, Steven Meeks, Chris Noel, John Keating, Jeffery Anderson, Ginny Danbury, Original Female Character(s), Original Male Character(s), Chet Danbury

Additional Tags:
Slow Burn, Not Canon Compliant, Fix-It, LGBTQ Themes, Suggestive Themes, Emotional/Psychological Abuse, Gay Todd Anderson, Bisexual Neil Perry, Bisexual Knox Overstreet, Pansexual Charlie Dalton, Angst and Fluff and Smut, Boarding School, Inspired by All the Young Dudes - MsKingBean89, Daddy Issues, Mommy Issues, Brotherly Angst, Internalized Homophobia, Cameron is the worst, Neil just wants to be happy, I dont know how to write men in the 50's, Specific warnings at the beginning of chapters, Pining, Semi-Mutual Pining, Childhood Friends, Homophobic Language, Original Character(s), Denial of Feelings

Language:
English

Stats:
Published: 2021-04-21 Updated: 2022-07-30 Words: 183,296 Chapters: 48/80

Stupid

by indiebookstoregirlfriend

Summary

Neil just wants to get through his school years at Welton with little to no problems. All problems are simultaneously solved and caused when golden boy Jeffery Anderson's little brother decides to give Welton, and Neil, a shot.

--
AU where Todd actually goes to Welton for more than one year. Starts in fourth grade and is mostly third person limited based on Neil.

Heavily inspired by the format of All The Young Dudes

Previously titled 'through the years'

- Inspired by All the Young Dudes by MsKingBean89

Fourth—First Day At Welton

Chapter Summary

Neil's first day at Welton. He meets a few other boys.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tradition, Discipline, Honor, and Excellence.

Tradition made a lot of sense to Neil when he realized that the entirety of Welton's faculty was made up of aging, old men who looked as if they were to die any day now. He supposed that if those old croons ever *did* decide that maybe they could change something up around there, they'd all die of heart attacks. Probably wouldn't be a downer for Welton anyway, by the looks of it they kept old men lined up in the dozens, ready to replace another and carry on what they had left off. Neil didn't suppose he actually minded tradition, but he also didn't mind changing things up every once in a while or trying something new. Either worked for him.

Honor and Excellence fell in the same category for him. If you had excellence, you probably had honor. Excellence wasn't something Neil needed to be reminded he had to achieve. It was drilled into his brain even before the older boys came out holding the banner and he was made to stand and recite it. Honor was something Neil was familiar with. His family—his father—had a certain honor that he wouldn't dare try to smudge. He never acted out against his father at home let alone in public, but if he did, he was besmearing their honor. He needed to be excellent if he wanted honor.

Discipline was what didn't really make sense to him. He figured that everyone was disciplined in one way or another already and the crazy ones could just go to jail... or public school. He didn't think it was something a school needed to focus on enforcing. Not as one of their four main pillars at least. Neil tried as hard as he could to understand, and it came full circle back to the old men liking tradition. Old men liked to boss around and have control over younger people, so Neil thought that this was just another trick to do so. Convince the boys it's an important pillar so they don't have to do much brainwashing themselves.

Yeah, safe to say Neil knew he wasn't going to like Welton all that much, but it wasn't his choice whether or not he got to go there. It wasn't his choice whether or not he got to do anything, really. He was informed of the decisions, but nothing he said could ever really influence them either way. He'd grown used to it, convincing himself that the decisions made for him were the decisions he would've made anyway. But this... a boarding school... Neil couldn't picture himself ever wanting this. He thought the four pillars of Neil were different to the four pillars of Welton.

Fun, Girls, Girls, and Girls

Okay, maybe not that, but it did suck to him that Welton was an all-boys school. How was he supposed to find his true love there and convince her to get married to him because he was a rich, famous doctor? He poked holes in his father's life plan for him, but he would never actually say it. Neil just hoped that maybe his father would realize his son wasn't going to have a blossoming romance in an all-boys boarding school and wasn't going to focus on girls when he went to medical school. A perfect doctor needed a perfect family. That was all Neil had to depend on, to hope for, when it came to thoughts about getting out of having to go to Welton.

His parents didn't really say goodbye to him. Telling your son to 'make sure to not disappoint you' and then turning around and leaving wasn't exactly the greatest goodbye. He thought maybe his mother would build up the courage to at least hug him or something, but she was gone even before his father was. He was sure he wasn't going to disappoint. Sure he wasn't going to do that as soon as he figured out where the hell he was going. The older boys knew their way around rather quickly and offered little to no help to any little one struggling near them, so Neil was left standing in a frenzy of people walking around him until they finally all disappeared and he tried to find his way around.

"Are you Neil Perry?"

Neil turned around, surprised he'd missed one person still standing there. It was another boy, thankfully around his age, leaning up against one of the *actual* pillars of the Welton building. He was definitely nine, same as Neil, but he looked like he thought he was too cool to be a nine-year-old.

Neil crossed his arms, trying to match up to him. "Who's asking?"

"Charles Dalton," The boy said and pushed himself off the pillar, walking toward Neil with an outstretched hand. "Or Charlie, if you prefer, actually, I do prefer you call me Charlie. I'm no Charles."

"Nice to meet you, Charlie," Neil responded and shook the boys hand. "Are we going to be roommates. That how you know my name?"

"Yes," Charlie responded, "Saw you looking lost and thought I'd stick around. I'm a Welton veteran."

"Well... thanks."

"Don't even mention it."

Charlie then walked off, expecting Neil to follow. He walked the halls just like Neil thought any 'Welton veteran' would, even exposing some short cuts and secret passages. It didn't feel like a normal, official tour to Neil. He was sure those kind of tours didn't include which windows teachers forgot to unlock sometimes. He knew that Welton was a hard place to sneak out of, but walking with Charlie, it felt like he could probably go anywhere he wanted as long as he had him to guide him there. Charlie stopped at a hallway full of beaten down wooden doors and held out his arms.

"*Mi casa es su casa*," Charlie said, "That's Spanish for 'my house is your house' in case you didn't know."

"I didn't," Neil confirmed, "You speak Spanish?"

"I wouldn't say I'm fluent," Charlie responded, "But, yeah, I know a few words. Never got the chance to use *puta,* though, and I was really excited for that one."

"What's that mean?"

"Unfortunately, Neil, it's a word I probably shouldn't say on the holy day."

"But I wanna know the word," Neil insisted, getting pushed past by other boys who were bringing their stuff to their rooms. Neil thought that was a fine idea and pushed Charlie forward to tell him to bring them to their room. Charlie indeed did so, but it didn't make Neil stop bothering him. After they shut the door behind them and were given a little more privacy, the pleading actually got worse.

"Neil, Neil, Neil," Charlie tutted, "Are you suggesting I *curse* on the

holy day? That I disregard the Lord?"

"No one said to disregard the Lord," Neil responded, "So it's a curse?"

"I think you did," Charlie responded, "And, yeah, it is."

"If I guess it..." Neil smirked, "Will you tell me if I'm right?"

Charlie liked the look of that smirk on Neil's face, responding with his own. "Sure I will. S'long as *you're* the one disregarding the Lord."

Neil thought long and hard about every curse word he'd ever been exposed to. He didn't hear many in public. The only times he really did were the times where he upset his parents. "Shit?"

"Nope."

"Fuck?"

"Not that one."

"...Damn?"

"You're regressing here, Neil!" Charlie shouted dramatically, "That one's not even half as bad as the one we're talking about."

"Hell?"

Charlie then gasped dramatically and put a hand to his chest. "Neil Perry! Did you really just say that on the day of the Lord? Did you really? Was it worth it?" He dropped the gag after he was done laughing at Neil's displeased face. "Come on, you're still getting colder."

"I'm out!" Neil shouted back, "I don't know anymore."

"You lived in a bubble your whole life, boy?"

"Hold on," Neil suddenly said, "Cursing in Spanish is still cursing. You already said *Puta,* so you already cursed on the Lord's day. Sucker!" Neil laughed in triumph as Charlie looked impressed.

"You finally found the easy way," Charlie said, "The right word was 'bitch,' Neil. But you can't exactly go around calling these old man *putas.* It wouldn't feel right."

"Like how?"

"Ew," Charlie said after seeing the look on Neil's face. "Not like I would feel regret or anything. They just deserve a worse insult."

Neil decided that he liked Charlie. They spoke for the rest of the night till dinner and Neil didn't even realize that time was actually passing them by. He was probably supposed to be doing more important things like preparing for his first classes the next day, but Charlie made him laugh so hard water came out of his nose, and he thought that was a much better way to spend his time. Dinner that night was mashed potatoes and green beans, obviously the greatest dinner imaginable for the first night away from home for a bunch of boys. Neil didn't like mashed potatoes, Charlie didn't like green beans, so they swapped some of their food for the other's and ate enough quickly so you wouldn't be able to tell.

"How to get away with crime." Charlie smiled and high-fived Neil.

"You didn't really get away with anything," Another voice said, snapping Neil and Charlie out of their crime-loving fantasies they'd been making up after thinking they were so good. "A lot of people saw you."

Charlie looked up at the boy who was sitting across from them at the table. He had glasses and blond hair. Charlie narrowed his eyes at him. "No one who mattered."

"Yeah, luck you," The boy responded, "No tattletales saw you either."

Neil stabbed a green bean with his fork and pointed at the boy. "Well, how would you have done it?"

"I would've sucked it up," The boy responded, mixing the green beans and mashed potatoes together on his plate. "There's at least two solutions to every problem."

Charlie leaned forward. "Who are you? Socrates?"

"No," The boy said, "Steven Meeks. Nice to meet you, though."

"Neil," Neil said, "And that's Charlie, but he prefers to be called Charles."

"Shut it, Perry." Charlie hit Neil on the shoulder. "*Puta*."

"Hey!" Neil shouted and then shoved Charlie. "It doesn't make sense to call me it either!"

"Boys, settle down right now unless you want to be wiping down the windows past lights out," A teacher called from the other end of the dining hall. Charlie rolled his eyes and went back to spooning up the potatoes on his plate.

"Hey," Neil said, "Let me borrow some potato real quick."

"No." Charlie had a mouth full of potatoes and Neil ended up having to wipe some off the table before someone came over and punished them for making a mess. "You gave em' up fair and square."

"Two solutions to every problem," Neil repeated and gave Steven a little look. "Why not try both? See which one I like better?"

"Mm," Steven said, "I like the way you think, Neil."

Chapter End Notes

I really don't know where this is going. I'm just plotting it as I type it out, really.

Fourth—That's What I'm Talking About

Chapter Summary

> Neil and Charlie meet a few new friends and officially get a start on the friend group that's gonna get them through their years at Welton.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Neil's first few classes of his first day at Welton went okay. They were by no means the *best* of all his school days—he could've fallen asleep at least seven different times during his first three classes—but they hadn't gone bad either. Not for him at least because he knew how to shut his mouth and fly under the radar. Charlie, however, did not, and had already got himself back row seats in every single class so he could be the furthest he could from everybody. Neil had a plan to pretend that, even though Charlie was his roommate, he was going to pretend like he hated him just as much as everyone else did, just so he didn't get in trouble. Charlie told him he wasn't allowed to do that, but then again Charlie couldn't really do much when he was all the way in the back of the classroom.

Luckily Steven Meeks seemed to not have made any other friends yet, so Neil sat next to him in every class after Charlie had sealed his own fate. Meeks was very smart as far as Neil could tell. So smart he actually felt disappointed in himself that he wasn't that smart. If his father saw that he was sitting next to someone who was better than him, he probably would've told him to move seats to focus on his own studies. But his father wasn't there. Neil realized that and decided to continue sitting next to Meeks. He made Neil feel a little bad about his own intellect, but a little friendly competition was inspiration more than anything else, right?

And he didn't want to be a loner at the other side of the classroom, that was a definite reason too.

Neil was actually doing a little better than Meeks at the class they were currently in. Latin. Probably because it was just a bunch of writing and rewriting and speaking a bunch of random words, but as far as Neil could tell, his notebook looked a lot more organized than Meeks' did. The kid sitting behind him—Neil was fairly sure his name

was Richard Cameron—was doing *too* much in his notebook. He took a ruler to make a language chart, double checking that every corner was an exact ninety degree angle. Neil thought himself at a fair medium between Meeks and Cameron. Not as weirdly obsessive as Cameron and not as messy as Meeks.

"Hey." Neil turned around and tapped his pencil on Cameron's desk. Cameron tried to ignore him, but Neil didn't give up. Eventually the other boy put down his ruler and sighed deeply, looking up at who had interrupted him. "You know they don't grade how straight the lines in your notes are, right?"

"So what?" Cameron responded, but still looked down at his notes with a slight regret. "I shouldn't be neat?"

"I didn't say that," Neil responded, "Just... don't stress yourself out over your notes so much, alright? There's plenty else to freak out over."

"I'll keep that in mind." Cameron sounded not nearly as grateful as that sentence would imply he was. He even had a scowl on his face. "Thanks."

"Gosh," Neil said and turned back around, seeing Meeks staring at him. The boy on the other side of Meeks, Gerard Pitts, was looking at him too. Meeks had been helping him with his latin, so Neil assumed Pitts must've been attached to him now. That's where Neil and Steven were different. Neil would help someone if they asked him to, help them by directing them to Meeks. He was much better at assisting people in schoolwork. Meeks was a tutor and Neil was more of the help-the-old-lady-carry-in-her-groceries kind of helpful. Neil met Meeks' eyes and nodded his head behind him. "*Someone* woke up on the wrong side of the bed."

"Impressive," Meeks replied, "Since those twin beds really don't even have two sides."

"Maybe he *wanted* to wake up on the wrong side," Pitts suddenly contributed, "And then got pissed because he couldn't."

"Hey!" Cameron yelled, obviously hearing since they weren't whispering and he was right there behind him. They had been able to keep their conversation on the down low, but his yell got the teacher to look up in the direction of their group.

"Boys," He warned carefully, "No talking during the assignment. Do I need to move you around?"

"No, sir," Cameron said quickly and cowered back into his desk chair while Pitts and Meeks gave him pointed glares. "I'm sorry, sir."

"Apology accepted," The teacher said and then waved his hand while looking at all the boys in the classroom. "Show's over, scoundrels, get back to work."

Neil realized that as soon as Cameron had yelled, every other student in the classroom had looked up to see what was going on. Charlie met his eyes and raised his eyebrows, Neil just shrugged. He didn't actually know what Charlie was trying to communicate with him, but he didn't want to get yelled at again if he kept his body turned around. His latin wasn't interesting to him anymore, though, so he just stared down at his paper until class finally ended and it was lunch time. When he stood up to leave, Meeks had already picked up his stuff and was handing it to him.

"Meet ya outside?" Meeks asked, "Pitts and I are gonna hit the can real quick."

"Yeah," Neil nodded, "Charlie and I are probably gonna drop all this crap off at our dorm first, though."

"Oo can you go in my dorm and get something for me?" Pitts asked and then stepped forward to lean in close to Neil so the teacher couldn't hear him. "I'm trying to make something and I left my supplies in there."

"Uh..." Neil simultaneously did and did not like the way Pitts had said that to him. He looked over at Cameron's perfectly empty desk and then back to Pitts. "Isn't *he* your roommate?"

"Oh, right, yeah," Pitts said with sudden disdain. "He's probably in there by himself reading War and Peace. Thanks for the reminder, Neil. I'll just member' to bring it tomorrow. Let's go, Meeks."

The two of them left and Neil felt two hands on his shoulders. The hands started shaking him, so he turned around and pushed the person away from him because he knew it was just Charlie annoying him. He straightened out his sleeves and gave Charlie an angry look. He must've actually looked mad, because Charlie apologized and put his head down as they left the classroom. Neil checked the hallways and as soon as he saw they were clear, he pounced on Charlie.

"Ah!" Charlie yelped, "You trickster! I thought you'd lost your spark! Not the hair!" He swatted away Neil's hands that were ruffling his hair

as much as they possibly could. Unfortunately, Neil seemed to be stronger, so his neat hair got entirely knotted and tangled. Charlie pushed Neil off and ran to a near water fountain to gawk at his messy hair. "No! My core center of my beauty!" He whipped around and pointed a finger at Neil. "You're in for it, Perry."

"Oh yeah?" Neil laughed and grabbed all their stuff that had fallen to the floor. He could've swore he heard a teacher coming around the corner, so he figured it would be best to pretend like they were about to walk back to their dorm before they got yelled at for loitering or something. Charlie caught on and soon they were down the hall approaching their dorms. "And what're you gonna do?"

"Something evil," Charlie responded and unbuttoned his Welton jacket, throwing it on his bed and then collapsing in his desk chair. It'd been one day and all Charlie had done was complain about how stuffy that jacket was. "Go in your closet and wrinkle all your shirts."

Neil faked a gasp. "You wouldn't."

Charlie stood up with fake intimidation. "I would."

"You're so stupid." Neil laughed and pushed him. "C'mon we gotta meet Meeks outside."

"We gotta?" Charlie complained.

"We gotta," Neil confirmed and then reached forward and ruffled Charlie's hair again before taking off in a dead sprint toward the grounds outside. Charlie was hot on his heels and Neil was constantly looking behind him to see how close he was. They were both lucky no teachers seemed to be in the halls they were sprinting through. Neil thought that there was actually nobody in the halls, so he kept most of his focus on pinpointing where Charlie was behind him. "I think you're a bit slow!"

"I'm saving my energy for when I catch you!"

"Yeah, if you do!" Neil laughed and then finally turned his head in front of him again. Too late. He knocked right into a boy and they both went falling to the ground. Neil heard Charlie's approaching footsteps, but he was way more concerned about the concussion he could've given this poor boy. Charlie realized what was going on and was soon behind Neil, dragging him back onto his feet from the armpits. Then he stepped forward and stretched out a hand to the boy on the ground.

"I see my colleague has just bowled himself into you. Allow me to make up for it," Charlie said and Neil kicked his ankle. The boy on the floor took his hand graciously and stood himself up. He then wiped down his pants and looked back up at the two boys. Neil thought that he might've been the same boy who sat in front of Charlie in most of their classes. "I'm Charlie Dalton and my idiot friend here is Neil Perry."

"Nice to meet you," The boy said in a polite tone even though he'd literally just been thrown to the floor by one of them. "I'm Knox Overstreet."

"Well, Kuh-nox," Charlie slapped a hand on his shoulder. "At least you're witness to tell me that I totally was gonna catch Neil before he got outside, right?"

"Oh, shut up!" Neil stomped his foot, "I was miles ahead of you!"

"He's right," Knox agreed and Neil gave him a smile, but that smile quickly disappeared as Knox said his next words. "But you would *never* be able to run from me."

"Oh," Charlie said with a mischievous glint in his eye. "I like you, Kuh-nox."

Neil was horrified when he saw Knox match up with the look in Charlie's eye. He knew that someone who could match up with Charlie was terrifying, and he knew it because he'd been the first to do so, and he knew what a menace he was. Knox gave a little smirk and leaned down to tie his shoe. "Not for long."

"What are you doing?" Neil asked when he saw that Knox's dress shoes were already tied and he was just double-knotting them.

"Giving you time to run."

"Oh yeah!" Charlie shouted and grabbed Neil's wrist. "This is what I'm talking about! Hope you didn't wear yourself out, Neil!" Then he took off and dragged Neil along behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Oh my gosh. I know eleven kudos is not a lot but hello to anyone reading this. Just a quick reminder I have no real plot in mind

and am just writing whatever comes to mind at the moment to cope with the *real* ending of the movie. I hope you enjoy reading regardless! Todd isn't going to be here until fifth grade, just to let you all know :)

Fourth—Goody Two-Shoes and the Devil on His Shoulder

Chapter Summary

> Charlie decides that the past month has been too boring, so he recruits Neil to have some fun.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Neilllllll."

Nothing.

"Neillllllllll."

Nothing.

"Neil!"

"Ah!" Neil shot up out of bed and almost headbutted Charlie who was hovering right above him. Charlie held in his yelp and backed away holding his nose, scared it was going to be bleeding. "What are you doing!?"

"Gosh, Neil." Charlie clutched his nose and Neil saw his dark form meandering around looking for a tissue to shove up his nostril. "Is your forehead made of steel?"

"Yeah, it activates like Iron Man when I get shocked." Neil rubbed his head because the collision had hurt him just as much as it had hurt Charlie. He stood up off his bed and grabbed their clock off the wall, holding it close to his face so he actually had a chance of reading the time it had on it. "Two-thirty!? What is wrong with you!?"

Charlie went for Neil's knees and brought him crashing back down to the mattress as hard as he could without being too loud that he would wake up everyone and their mother. He sat on top of Neil and covered his mouth so he wouldn't yell at him anymore. "I thought we could do a little exploring?"

"At two-thirty in the morning?" Neil muffled through Charlie's hand and tried his best to shove his roommate off of him, but it wasn't

working. Charlie was determined, meaning he was going to get what he wanted no matter how hard Neil fought him. Neil was slowly learning how to build a resistance and he thought maybe one day he'd be able to successfully defy Charlie.

"We can't do it otherwise!"

Neil finally managed to get Charlie off of him, but actually ended up having to catch him before he slammed on the ground and made that loud noise they were trying hard to avoid. He grabbed Charlie's wrist and Charlie shoved his toes between Neil's bed and the wall, so his arm was stretched behind him from where Neil had caught him. His face was about two inches from the floor and he could smell the splinters.

"It's literally our school. We can walk around it all the time," Neil said and then climbed on top of Charlie's back, grabbing onto Charlie's other wrist and pulling it back like he was arresting him. Charlie winced at the stretch, but showed no other signs of weakness. "So what are you *actually* planning, weirdo?"

Charlie had had other friends before, but none of them had stuck around for long. He'd known Neil for about a month and somehow he just knew he was going to stick around forever. This was a weird thing to realize while Neil was sitting on top of him, torturing him, after Charlie had just woken him up at two-thirty in the morning, but Charlie had a knack for realizing things at weird times.

"Fine, fine! Uncle!" Charlie said and Neil let go of him and he went falling toward the floor again. Face first with his feet slipping. "Ah! Wait! I take it back. Aunt?"

Neil laughed. "Aunt?"

"The opposite of uncle! I was taking it back!" Charlie said. Neil slipped off his back as he slowly slid to the floor and Charlie somehow managed to hook his foot under Neil's knee and the extra weight brought them both to the ground. There was that noise. They both rushed off of each other and to their respective beds. Well, tried to do that anyway. Being in the dark and falling on the ground was not a good combination, and Neil actually lost his sense of direction and ended up falling into Charlie's bed. He knew he had made a mistake when he heard Charlie grunt in surprise. "Buy me dinner first."

"I hate you," Neil said and then ran across the room to his own bed. Earlier he had been excited to finally be sleeping. He'd had a lot of

late nights that week trying to stay on top of schoolwork, and having Charlie as a roommate was more than just an obstacle. Yet he somehow wasn't tired enough to fall back asleep the second his head hit the pillow. His body found its previous position quite naturally, but his eyes were wide open.

Him and Charlie pretended to be asleep as their door opened and their light flickered on. They had no real idea who had walked in, but they knew playing dead was the best move. Neil even heard a few fake snores come from Charlie. He knew they were fake because his *real* snoring was much more disturbing. Luckily, it only happened when he was in a super-deep sleep, which didn't happen a lot because Charlie's energy didn't need to be replenished. The light turned off again and once the pitter patter of footsteps was far enough, Charlie was on top of him again.

"Fine, here's my real plan." Charlie threw Neil's blankets off of him and dragged him off his bed, a lot more soundlessly this time. He threw open the curtains so the tiny beams of moonlight could ominously illuminate what he was holding in his hand. "Thumbtack."

"Oh my god," Neil rolled his eyes, wanting to collapse backward onto his bed.

"Stick with me here!" Charlie said and pulled out a small box from the desk drawer. He shook it around and they both heard the rattling. "Thumbtack*s,* now, which teacher do you hate the most? I'm thinking math."

Neil suddenly grew a smile on his face. "You're only saying that cause you have a D."

"Hey, not since I've got Meeks helping me," Charlie said and put the one thumbtack into his little box. "So who do you suggest?"

Neil looked up with a smirk. "English."

Charlie clapped him on the shoulder and then slowly led them both over to the door. They pressed their ears against it, and once they knew it was clear, they made a run for it down the hall and to the fourth grade English classroom. Somehow, it was unlocked and they ran right in and to the front of the classroom where the professor's wooden chair was pushed into his desk. Charlie hummed thoughtfully and pulled it dramatically from its cubbie. "Any ideas how we make it less obvious?"

"By doing this..." Neil grabbed the thumbtack box and dropped down on his knees, climbing under the desk. "Is there glue anywhere?"

"Gotcha, captain." Charlie handed him a bottle of glue and Neil got to work. He covered the inside walls of the desk with glue and stuck thumbtacks as evenly as he could around each one, then he carefully shimmied out and popped up right next to Charlie. He was having fun. A golden boy with a little bit of mischief... that was charming right? Wouldn't ruin his doctor life path. Everyone was a little mischievous when they were young. Maybe he'd be less likely to hired as a doctor if everyone thought he was an emotionless robot in his youth.

"You're a genius, Neil, my boy!" Charlie grabbed his shoulders and shook him around in happiness. "He'll never see it coming. Push in his chair to grade papers and then boom!" Charlie started poking Neil all over the torso and arms. "Bunch of tiny little holes!"

"Yeah, okay..." Neil said through laughter and tried to escape Charlie. "Okay, okay, stop!"

Charlie stopped for a second and met Neil's eyes. "You telling me you're ticklish?"

"No!" Neil shoved him away and then started walking through the door. "Let's go back. If we get caught, we're dead, and you gotta be alive if you wanna brag all about this to Knox and Meeks tomorrow."

"Meeks'll be so impressed." Charlie smoothed back his hair and shut the door quietly behind them as they tiptoed back into the hallway.

"And Knox?"

"Kuh-nox... knoxious..." Charlie listed and trailed off. "Um, he's impressed by me no matter what I do, so it doesn't really matter."

That sounded like a Charlie thing to say, but the way he was saying it did not feel right to Neil. It wasn't full of snark and confidence like his comments like that usually were. It was almost like it was just a cover up for something else Charlie wanted to say, but he decided that something else would be better. Of course Neil noticed, because this wasn't the first time he'd acted like this. Neil was just trying to connect the dots and figure out what triggered it each time it happened. He was at a loss, so he was just going to ask because it was three am and maybe Charlie would be up for telling him, but they ran into the guard dog.

"Shit," Charlie said and slapped Neil's chest, "We forgot about Chewbacca."

"Chewbacca?" Neil asked, "That doesn't really—"

"Fine, we forgot about the Chupacabra!" Charlie yelled frantically and interrupted. "Either way we're screwed. Meeks will *never* hear how cool I am now that I'm dog chow."

"It's okay," Neil said in fake comfort, "I don't think he was ever going to."

"Alright, you asked for this, human shield."

Neil had no time to ask what that meant before Charlie grabbed the back of his pajama shirt and started pushing him forward. He realized what human shield meant very quickly and pulled from Charlie's grip to start sprinting. The dog was not stupid, so it started barking immediately, so they both sped up until they finally reached their dorm and threw themselves into their respective beds, successfully this time. They heard a lot of footsteps that time and Charlie laughed loudly.

"They'll never suspect you, Neil," He said, "Thanks for being a goody-two-shoes."

Neil yawned and rolled over to face the wall. "Thanks for being the worst, Charlie."

"Goodnight."

"Mm, night."

Chapter End Notes

> Charlie and Neil are my favorite friendship if you couldn't tell. I wrote this while very tired so I'm sorry if it makes no sense.

Fourth—What's It To You?

Chapter Summary

> Cameron seems to be joining the group, but something's up with Knox and Charlie. Neil tries to find out and ends up finding out that something's up with him instead.

Chapter Notes

> CW for homophobic themes! Not that bad, but it is mentioned.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"You guys did *what*!?"

"God," Charlie complained and stood up off the grass, brushing off the back of his pants and throwing the extra blades of grass at Richard Cameron. Cameron glared at him, but not like that ever mattered to Charlie. Charlie kicked the back of Pitts' shoe with a little scoff. "Why did you bring him?"

Pitts looked at the ground in shame while Meeks awkwardly pursed his lips and whistled, looking the other way. Eventually he rubbed the back of his neck and avoided eye contact. "He caught Meeks and I working on our radio and threatened to tell unless we..."

"Got him friends?" Charlie was suddenly very entertained by this, walking over behind Cameron and leaning his elbows on the tops of his shoulders. He set his chin atop the palm of his hands and made a clicking sound with his mouth. "Well, well, well, the other shoe just dropped."

Cameron shrugged Charlie off of him very viciously and then glared at Pitts, who looked regretful for a multitude of reasons. Charlie seemed to be the only one who was entertained out of all of them with a smirk that never left his face. He attempted to follow Cameron to continue annoying him, but Neil caught his elbow and pulled him down on the rock he was sitting on to keep him from doing that. Cameron was in the middle of storming off in anger, mumbling something about why he even bothered, but the second Neil stood up, he stopped walking. Neil hadn't even touched him.

"Where are you going?" Neil asked sincerely. The rest of the group, besides Charlie, was uncomfortable, but Neil had a sincere smile on

his face the entire conversation. From when Charlie was telling the story of their awesome prank to when Cameron freaked out. He walked up behind Cameron and grabbed his shoulders, turning him back around to face the group. "Come on, I know you don't like English! Right..." Neil searched the faces of his friends and settled on Knox. He slapped Cameron's shoulder one more time. "Right, Knox? You've seen him at his desk!"

Knox had a thing for ending up on the side of whoever recruited him first. He nodded quickly. "Oh definitely. He could be Van Gogh with all the drawings he does in that class."

Cameron was flushed red. "Shut *up*."

"No, no, wait." Meeks pushed his glasses up with a lop-sided smile. "You be Van Gogh and I'll be Da Vinci." He reached into the chest pocket of Pitts' jacket and pulled out a folded piece of paper, shoving it toward Cameron. "Here's my Mona Lisa."

Cameron, after a reassuring gesture from Neil, grabbed the paper out of Meeks' hand and unfolded it carefully. Surprisingly, he guffawed, and the entire group widened their eyes at the sound. It seemed impossible coming from him. Neil looked over his shoulder and laughed out loud too. In Cameron's hand was a devilish, cartoon drawing of their English teacher with Meeks' name messily written in the bottom right corner. Charlie snatched the photo once the others had gotten a good laugh at it and then sat down next to Knox so they could look at it together.

"You've been keeping your art talents hidden from me?" Charlie gasped with fake offense while Meeks rolled his eyes, making Charlie only get more and more dramatic. He stood up with the back of his hand pressed to his forehead. "And then you betray me by letting *Pitts* keep it in his pocket. What am I to you, Meeks? Do our hours in the common room mean nothing to you?"

Meeks then suddenly played along. "No, Charles, they mean everything to me." Knox was entertained by the scene while Pitts let out a happy whistle, even Cameron had a light smile playing on his lips at the scene in front of them. Meeks stood up and grabbed Charlie's wrists and looked deep into his eyes. "Should we get married?"

Charlie wiped a tear under his eye that wasn't there. "Do you know a priest, my dear?"

"Gross," Cameron whined, still with a smile. He shoved Charlie's shoulder.

"Jealous?" Charlie asked, "Do you want me?"

"I hate you," Cameron said, but ended up sitting back down where he'd been originally. "Seriously reckless. It's only your second year, Charlie, do you want to get expelled?"

"Oh, I *hope*," Charlie said with a dreamy look that seemed inappropriate in the conversation. "But what for? The thumbtacks or my relations with another boy?"

Cameron gagged. "Both, I hope."

The whole group laughed, but Neil couldn't help but notice Charlie's nails digging into the side of his pant leg, and when he went to sit back down, instead of sitting next to Knox like he always did, he opted for annoyingly sitting right next to Pitts when Meeks had intended to. The both of them were too in tune to one another's emotions at that point, because Charlie looked up the second Neil wanted him to and they had a silent conversation with just their eyebrows and the tilt of their heads.

'Are you alright?' Neil conveyed with a raise of his eyebrow.

'Yeah, why wouldn't I be?' Charlie's confused look responded.

'Fine, we'll talk about it later,' Neil's annoyed expression said.

'Whatever,' Charlie rolled his eyes and refused to meet Neil's again.

"I do have to admit," Meeks started, pushing up his glasses again and Neil swore he did it more than he needed to just to fit a weird nerd stereotype. "The placement of the tacks was quite genius."

"Thank you, thank you." Neil bowed. "I'll be here all year." Neil mimicked Meeks' crooked smile and then looked around at the group once more. Pitts was annoyed as Charlie kept picking small balls of fluff off the material of his tie, Meeks had turned his attention to Cameron to try and get him to show the group his 'Starry night,' but Knox was sitting alone on the grass, nervously fingering it. Neil cocked his head, wondering what was *up* with his friends today, and walked forward to kick the sole of Knox's shoe. Knox looked up and Neil didn't even have to say anything to get him up off the ground and walking away from the group. They made up something about

sneaking in to steal a snack and headed for the doors that led back inside the building.

"So what's happening?" Neil asked, deciding that stealing a snack actually sounded like a pretty good idea to him since they didn't really know where they were actually going.

"Is Charlie mad at me?"

Neil stopped for a second and furrowed his brows as if that was a real question. Charlie... mad at Knox? Knox could hit Charlie over the head with one of their freakishly large textbooks and Charlie wouldn't blink an eye. "Not that I know of."

Knox shrugged and kicked at the ground. "S'nothing much, anyway. He just seems mad at me."

"I'll talk to him about it."

"You don't have to—"

"I'll talk to him about it," Neil asserted, then all ideas of a snack left his mind as a new plan put itself into motion. He turned to Knox with a look that troubled the other boy completely and entirely. "You know what? I think Cameron keeps his drawings in his English textbook..." Luckily for Neil's plan, the school staff didn't trust a bunch of nine-year-old boys to responsibly carry their books around, so they kept them in their classrooms, and Neil had seen Cameron shove quite a few papers into his. He swiveled around and pointed down the hall. "Let's go find that Starry Night."

Knox ended up leading the way back to the English classroom and Neil never pictured himself willingly going there more than once a day, yet he'd done it twice already. The door was open so the two easily walked inside, prepared with an excuse involving actually wanting to learn in case they were questioned, but once they were in they noticed that their English teacher wasn't actually in there. Someone else was, though, that's why the door was open. Neil's and Knox's footsteps went from quiet to silent as they stopped in their tracks and stared at the boy who had situated himself in the classroom. He hadn't noticed them yet. How could he when every paper in the world was strewn out on the desk in front of him. This kid had a pencil in his hand *and* a pencil behind his ear.

Knox and Neil looked at each other and then back to the kid. Maybe he was a narc. He obviously had to be a teacher's pet if he was

allowed to be in the classroom unsupervised with the door open. Then again, Neil was a teacher's pet and he'd never turn anyone in for anything. If he caught someone running naked in the halls he'd probably just tell them to have a good day. Neil pointed over to the shelves where their books were kept and whispered the number of Cameron's so he could go get it. Then he walked right up behind this random kid and tapped him on the shoulder.

He jumped at the contact and turned around to see who had touched him. He calmed down, and almost seemed annoyed, when he realized it was just another student tapping him. Neil figured he couldn't be that much older than him or Knox. Two or three years at most. Neil had a slight fear of sixth and seventh grade boys, they seemed a whole lot meaner, but this one presented no harm to him. Only if looks could kill, then he'd be in trouble.

"Sorry—uh..." Neil didn't actually know what his game plan was, he just wanted to know who this kid was, so he went with the first thing that came to mind. "Are you supposed to be in here? I thought we weren't allowed to be in classrooms alone."

"I study here during outside time." The boy looked over his shoulder when there was a couple of loud banging sounds. Knox had dropped some books off of the shelves. He gave Neil an apologetic look as soon as the boy had turned back around. "Are *you* supposed to be in here? You know you're not allowed to take books back to your dorm, right?"

"Yeah, yeah I know," Neil assured, "We just left... an assignment in one of our books. It's due next class, sooo..."

"Well, when the teacher gets back I do need to tell him you came in here. So what are your guys' names?"

"Uhm, well, I'm Neil Perry and that's Knox Overstreet." Neil picked up a pencil that was on the floor, presuming it was the one that had been behind the boy's ear, but it had fallen when he scared him. He awkwardly slid the pencil back to its former place. "And... what's your name? I—I don't have to report you to anyone. I'm just wondering."

"Jeffery Anderson," The boy responded with a roll of his eyes. Seriously, if looks could kill. That was the last thing Jefferey bothered saying to Neil, and Neil was alright with that. He gave a glance to Knox, who had found *nothing* despite having been given all the time in the world, and they both darted out of the classroom. Outside time was almost up so they didn't bother going back out. They just shuffled

themselves across the tiled floors until the next bell rang.

"Jeffery Anderson," Knox repeated with a tone of wonder. "He's been the top of the principal's list for five years."

"You were four, how would you know that?"

"They give him this award and show him off every time he gets it," Knox explained, "'Oh, you should all *strive* to be like Mr. Anderson. Five years in a row. Truly incredible!'"

"That was such a good impression that I might have to hurt you."

"I mean thanks," Knox said, "Do you think he's going to be suspicious we walked out without any papers?"

Neil stopped, forgetting the lie *he* had made up for them. He sighed. "Yeah, probably."

Luckily, Jeffery seemed to have forgotten their existence or hadn't noticed they'd left without anything, because Mr. Nolan didn't come knocking down Neil's door to yell at him for wandering in classrooms when he wasn't supposed to. Neil hadn't been that stressed about it... only worrying if it would be a large enough offense to get his father involved, but he still didn't feel very chipper for the rest of the day. Top of the principal's list for five years. That's what Neil had to assume his dad wanted for him, and so far, he hadn't been trying that hard to get there. He tried to forget about it when he was in his dorm after dinner, but it wasn't escaping him, so he motioned to question Charlie about his attitude earlier.

"So what was up?" Neil asked.

"Ugh," Charlie groaned. He was laying on his bed, staring up at the ceiling. "I told you it was nothing."

"Didn't seem like nothing." Neil stood up and wandered to the other side of the room, sitting on the edge of Charlie's bed. "Seriously, you can tell me what's wrong."

"Stop being such a *girl*," Charlie complained and turned away from him to face the wall. Neil thought he wasn't going to talk again, but eventually he did. "There's nothing wrong with girls by the way. I'm actually kind of fond of them."

"Who would've thought?" Neil joked, and he felt better when he heard

a little laugh come from Charlie.

"If you were a girl, I'd totally date you."

"Thanks, Charlie." Neil shook his head, and then suddenly something dawned upon him. "You're upset bout' what Cameron said, aren't you?"

"You gotta be specific," Charlie mumbled, "I'm upset about a lot of things Cameron does."

"The thing about him hoping you got expelled?"

"No, Neil, why would that upset me? I *hope* that I get expelled from this stupid—" Charlie went on a rant, but cut himself short when he realized he was probably going to be wasting both their time. He took a short breath to make up for the previous breaths he'd used and then sat up abruptly. "I just think he's got no business mowing around in whether or not I wanna marry a boy." Charlie expected at least a little bit of shock from Neil, but was met with none. He'd known what it was about after all.

"Maybe," Neil agreed, "But a lot of people think a lot of things are their business around here. Thought you knew that."

"What's it to you?" Charlie suddenly asked, "If I wanted to marry a boy, I mean."

"Well, do you?" Neil asked.

"I don't know. I'm nine."

"Then we'll both figure it out later," Neil dismissed. It's not that he didn't feel comfortable having this conversation with Charlie. It wasn't that at all. He just knew how things were around there, and he didn't want someone to hear them through the walls and suggest they get burned at the stake or something. He picked under his nails. "Knox thinks you're mad at him."

"Mad at my Kuh-nox?" Charlie said, "Why would I be mad at him?"

"Thas' what I said," Neil agreed, "But I told him I'd talk to you bout' it."

"Do I—Do I seem mad at him?"

"I don't think so?"

"Well, I gotta fix this." Charlie shot up off the bed and was at the door in less than two seconds. "I'll be back, put some pillows under my blankets in case I'm not back before bed check." He didn't even let Neil respond before exiting the room. All Neil heard from then was the quick, but soft padding of Charlie's socks as he made his way down the hall to Knox and Meeks' room. He didn't want to know what Charlie was going to do to Meeks when he got there. Hopefully just politely ask him to leave, but Neil knew better than that.

Usually at night, him and Charlie would play a game of cards to wind down and go to bed, but Neil had nothing to wind down with. He tried just tucking himself in his bed and closing his eyes—after setting up Charlie's pillows, of course—but that didn't even get close to working. He switched his lamp back on and then looked at his desk. Maybe he could get a start on next week's assignments...

Maybe he could be like Jeffery Anderson.

Chapter End Notes

> Commenters are so sweet :') especially since I have no idea where this book is going lol. Once again plotting it as I go. I don't wanna rush cause it makes me write bad, but I'm so excited to get Todd in the mix. Just had to introduce his brother first for that good ol brotherly angst tag.

Fourth—Old Men Are Mean, But Neil Has Good Friends

Chapter Summary

Neil tries to add an extracurricular to his schedule, but everything goes the opposite to what he was planning.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Neil, I support you, for real, but are you kidding me right now!?"

Charlie and Meeks were in the middle of rushing behind Neil as he walked through the halls with a mission in mind. He'd told Charlie what he was going to go do and was met with immediate disapproval and a gathering of his friends to tell him what an idiot he was. Pitts and Knox had given up a couple of hallways back, remembering just how persistent Neil could be when he wanted to do something. They would describe Neil as a spoiled brat who got everything he wanted if it wasn't for the fact Neil actually didn't just *get* everything he wanted. He worked for it and he deserved all he got, so the boys bit their tongues when he got this stubborn, but not this time. Not for Charlie and Meeks at least.

"Nope," Neil said and popped the 'p.' He wasn't completely ignoring them. Anything they said, he'd come back with a rebuttal. He called it practice. Practice for the debate team. While he was up late one night, he'd had the sudden realization that if he kept acing his schoolwork *and* he had extracurricular activities on his record, he'd be a scholar in no time. Something his dad could be proud of. He told none of this to Charlie for he knew he would get acceptance fueled by pity. He didn't tell Meeks, Knox, or Pitts either, purely just cause he didn't usually tell em' too much. "Completely serious."

"I don't understand," Meeks was going on, having to make his foot steps long to be able to keep up with the two giants in the hallway with him. Charlie wasn't too much taller. Three or four inches, but Meeks swore Neil was at least a foot taller than him. "You said you wanted to spend all your free time doing stuff that *didn't* involve Welton."

"There isn't much to do round' here that doesn't involve Welton," Neil

responded as if that was a stupid thing Meeks had just come up with, but that was a really thing he'd brought up himself and stood by. He had no rebuttal for that yet, so he opted for just pretending he never said it. "Plus, Jeffery Anderson is the Vice President."

Charlie almost stopped in confusion, but he didn't want to lose the gain he'd finally gotten on Neil. "And what about him? He's such a teacher's pet."

"Yeah, so am I," Neil said back, "Meeks too. You're the only one who isn't."

"Hey, I *choose* to sit in the back because Knox always has snacks."

Meeks rolled his eyes even if Charlie and him *were* supposed to be on the same side right then. "Can't you play a sport? Soccer?"

"Sports aren't open till' sixth grade."

"Neither is debate!" Meeks yelled back, "Why are you so set on embarrassing yourself? You're going to get rejected."

"Then they can note down my determined approach."

"Now, what's *that* gonna do ya'?" Charlie finally managed to get close enough to Neil to put a hand on his shoulder and turn him around. Neil let this happen and eventually stopped walking. He was sick of speed walking. He felt like an old lady at the super market. "Just cause Anderson has his nose up Nolan's ass doesn't mean you gotta."

"That's not what I'm—" Neil stopped himself and started again with a less angry tone. Him being angry only made Charlie more fired up as well and he already had too many bruises from the last time they both tried to be the alpha. "That's not why. If Jeffery likes me more maybe everyone else will too? And I just—I just *wanna* do debate, alright?" He thought he wanted to, at least.

"Hey, I'll do debate with you, Neil." Cameron came around a corner and Neil could sense both Meeks' and Charlie's annoyance at his presence. They tolerated Richard Cameron about .5% more each time they saw him, but they were always trying to avoid him, so in the past month he'd only become about 15% more tolerable to anybody besides Neil. Cameron tilted his head in thought. "Or, we can try at the least. Maybe they'd let us sit in on the debates or something? Doesn't sound too bad."

"That sounds horrible!" Charlie exaggerated, "Neil, you could be spending that time doing anything else."

"What else am I supposed to do?" Neil asked.

"Anything!"

"So full of suggestions..." Cameron muttered.

Charlie pointed at him. "You be quiet."

"Can I just do this!?" Neil asked exasperated, realizing how loud he'd actually been. He cowered a slight bit, only daring to make eye contact with Charlie after that outburst. "Just... please?" Charlie must've seen something in Neil's eyes, because he agreed to at the least leave Neil alone about it. He dragged Meeks off back toward the dorm hall and left him alone there with Cameron. To be honest, Neil wasn't quite sure why he was so dead-set on this either. It just seemed like something he'd want to do that his dad would approve of, and usually things like that didn't come around often. Mr. Perry never agreed with Neil's first choice in activities, so he really wanted to find something that would change that.

Him and Cameron made it to their dreaded English classroom to see about twelve boys and a teacher already in there. Neil instantly recognized Jeffery Anderson sitting on the teacher's desk and observing a conversation between two other boys. Neil had no idea how debate actually worked, but the thought of being judged by someone much smarter than him—like Jeffery—made him incredibly nervous. He felt the collar of his shirt tighten and tugged it away from his suddenly sweaty neck. At least Cameron looked somewhat as intimidated as Neil felt, but that meant practically nothing because Cameron looked intimidated at nearly everything. Both of them straightened like they were actually at military school. The teacher looked up from a stopwatch and his angry, old eyes landed on the two, young boys. Neil didn't recognize him.

"Are you two aware you are deliberately interrupting a practice?" He asked and stood up, and if Neil could've straightened up anymore, he would've. Everyone in the room went deadly silent when the teacher started talking, and it didn't make Neil feel better that they all looked terrified as soon as his back was turned to all of them. Even Jeffery had a worried expression on his face, and Neil figured he harbored no ill feelings toward teachers at all. "So unless I can help you I suggest you tend to your necessary studies."

"We just wanted to observe the debate practice," Neil suddenly found it within himself to say.

"I'm sure you're aware applying for extracurriculuars is supposed to be completed by the end of August," The teacher said, "And it is now November?"

"Yes, sir, I am aware." Neil swallowed and he felt oddly at home. "But I was not at the beginning of the year. This is my first year at Welton and, well, no one said—" Neil stopped that train of thought when he saw the deadly glare in the old man's eyes. "I found out too late."

"Well, you cannot be permitted to join," Him and Cameron were told, and he could imagine the gloating and boasting Charlie and Meeks would be doing right then about how right they had been and how wrong Neil was. "But you are going to be punished for interrupting. Mr. Anderson, would you assist these two in gathering the chalkboard cleaning supplies?" Then he said something about how they were lucky he wasn't in a bad mood, or he wouldn't just be scrubbing *his* blackboard. Jeffery agreed immediately and gestured for the two to follow him out the door and back into the hall.

"Listen, we're sorry for—"

"What were you thinking?" Jeffery cut Neil off in a hushed whisper, and he looked slightly terrified. "That you could just walk in? Mr. Levinsky doesn't operate that way. He could've killed you."

"Well, that's dramatic," Cameron said, but he didn't seem so confident in it. Jeffery ignored him and kept walking down the hall, and it didn't help Cameron's worry at all. "You're just being dramatic, right?"

"Hey, listen," Neil leaned over to Cameron. "You go back to the dorms. I'll make up some reason it's all my fault." Neil expected at least a little objection, but there was none as Cameron took off, sure to tell the others about how reckless he now thought Neil was.

"Shouldn't have offered," Jeffery said and opened a supply closet. He went in and emerged with a water-filled bucket, some soap, and a sponge. "Wish I had some earplugs for you too. The sound it makes is *horrid*."

Neil perked up at that. "You've done it before?"

"Yeah, obviously." Jeffery shoved all of the supplies in Neil's direction. "We all have, at least once. Don't do circular motions or you'll never

hear the end of it."

"Uh... thanks."

"Don't mention it," Jeffery responded and turned back around so they could start heading back. "And *don't* do anything that stupid ever again."

They made it back to the classroom where Mr. Levinsky gave Neil a very, very ominous glare, but besides that, he wasn't paid any more attention. He wasn't even asked where Cameron had gone. Neil could've cleaned the board in ten minutes, but he tripled that in fear of being called out for not trying hard enough or something. Thirty minutes later, he had to put everything back himself because 'he'd been shown it once, so he should remember where it goes now.' He shoved everything back in the closet and then shuffled back to his dorm room. When he opened the door, he saw Charlie and Knox.

"Hey," He said.

"Hey..." Knox responded, "Cameron said—"

"Yeah," Neil cut him off and flopped down on his bed. He put his hands on his face. "You were right, Charlie."

"I am most of the time," Charlie said, "But I'm sorry... like actually."

Neil let out an empty laugh. "Thanks. What were you guys doing?"

Charlie turned around in his chair dramatically, holding a list of some sort. "Checking on the scheduled activities for the year."

"Yeah? Find anything interesting?"

"Not particularly—Oh! Except this one thing." Charlie pointed the paper and then stood up to walk around the room. He suddenly tossed the paper up in the air. "It's not on this list, though. Was actually on this *card*—" Knox handed Charlie a ripped-open envelope that had the signature handwriting of Neil's parents when they were absentmindedly writing and sending out letters. Neil realized what was going on and sat up quick. "That I read. I did read it. In case it was an escape plan or something."

"That's a federal crime." Neil ripped the letter out of Charlie's hand and dunked it straight in the trash can. He got the same card every year, he didn't need to look at it again. If he was ever curious that it

was different, he'd just ask Charlie. "Opening somebody else's mail."

"You know what else is a federal crime?" Charlie said back quickly and then jumped on Neil. "Not telling your friends it's your birthday!"

"Ah!" Neil screamed as Charlie caused them both to fall down on the floor while Knox put his face in his hands, like that was exactly what he told Charlie *not* to do. "I didn't wanna make it a big deal!"

"It is a big deal!" Knox suddenly screamed and all his previous disappointment was thrown out the window as he joined in on Charlie's attack. "Double-digits!"

"Get off of me!"

"No!" Charlie cackled. Neil thought he was having way too much fun. He puckered his lips and smacked them obnoxiously. "We owe you ten birthday kisses!"

"Ew, do *not* kiss me!"

"Fine, five from both of us?"

"Get off!" Neil successfully threw Charlie off of him, but Knox was right there to continue the wrestling. Charlie rolled away and then stood up nonchalantly.

"Well, someone is getting kissed for your birthday."

"Kiss my ass!" Neil responded and then finally managed to get Knox off of him, bowling him straight into Charlie's legs, tangling them together so Neil had time to back away. He hopped up on his bed and backed himself up to the furthest corner. As Knox and Charlie got themselves back on their feet and tried to step closer, Neil picked up the desk lamp and pointed it at them. "Don't come any closer. I'm warning you!"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, cowboy," Charlie said, "Put the desk lamp down. We just wanna talk."

Neil did not put the lamp down. "I find that extremely hard to believe."

"Come on," Knox begged and then turned around and dropped to the floor next to Charlie's bed. He reached under and then stood back up with a little ugly brown box in hand. Someone had attempted to make

the box less ugly by wrapping a ribbon around it, but evidently that person did not know how to tie a bow, so it made it worse. "We got you something."

Neil finally lowered the lamp. "...Really?"

"Yeah," Charlie said and grabbed the box, "Me and Kuh-nox. The only other person we told was Meeks, swear on our lives, but you're not getting away next year."

"Okay," Neil said and stepped down from his bed and grabbed the box from Charlie. "Okay. Thanks."

"Well," Charlie said eagerly, "Open it!"

Neil had to tug the ribbon off with his teeth, but eventually he got it off and got the box open. He tossed the lid aside and pulled out the pair of glasses that laid inside. They were his... or ones that looked like his at least. He'd broken his at the beginning of the year when his suitcase fell over during the middle of the night, crashed into the radiator where Neil set his glasses, and knocked them down hard enough to break them. Neil knew that wasn't what happened. That was just the lie Charlie made up after he'd broken them somehow, but Neil let him get away with it. He didn't want to admit to anyone he'd broken them anyway. He unfolded the glasses and put them on his face. Most of the time, he didn't need them, but being able to read the calendar on Charlie's side of the room from that far away was a blessing.

"I fixed them," Charlie said and then got punched by Knox. "Okay, ow! Knox found some older boy whose dad does prescriptions and stuff. Asked him if he could fix them."

"And you did that all today?"

"... well, no," Charlie said, "It's been in the works. I've known your birthday was coming up for a while—and I swear I wasn't gonna tell *anyone*!—But I needed help and Knoxious provided."

"Yeah," Knox agreed, "Meeks reminded me that we actually hid that kid's cigs last month, so he owed us a favor."

"You had cigarettes!?" Neil said.

"That was not the point of the story."

"Sure," Neil let it go but only because of what they'd done for him. "I—thanks, guys."

"Happy birthday," Knox responded and then slowly added, "Stupid."

"Happy birthday," Charlie added and put an arm around Neil, then in sing-song tone said, "And a happy new year." Then, while Neil's guard was down, he pressed the most disgusting kiss Neil had ever experienced on his cheek. "Count that as ten, Perry."

"Count yourself as dead, Dalton."

Chapter End Notes

I am head-cannoning Neil's birthday in November

Fourth—A Christmas Concert

Chapter Summary

> The boys get ready for and perform at a Welton Christmas choir performance. Neil has a run-in with his father and has eerie feelings about an unknown boy.

Chapter Notes

> CW!! Slight homophobic themes because Cameron is an asshole and everyone was homophobic in the 50s

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I just think it's a bit girly."

Cameron was fussing over his hair being at a certain level of fluff in front of a mirror, trying to push ahead of multiple other boys who needed it much more than he did at the time. Neil, Knox, Pitts, and Meeks were sitting on the windowsill a few feet away, waiting for their two friends to finish getting ready. All four of them valued their privacy in different ways, so they had quickly become masters at navigating the showers. Especially during times like these when their entire grade and then some needed to crowd it for them all to get ready in time. Cameron took a while because his hair was so tough to get to his specific needs, but Charlie just loved staring at himself in the mirror.

That was the usual, anyway, but this time was worse because they actually had to try to look nice. Once again, the other four had nailed being able to do so with little effort. All their hair was slicked back and they were wearing slightly fancier blazers than usual, but the extra pressure made Charlie, and *especially* Cameron, much harder to wait for. They were on the brink of leaving them behind, thinking they were going to be late to their performance if this went on any longer.

Charlie straightened his eyebrow hairs in the mirror, leaning obnoxiously closer than he needed to. Somehow, he'd gotten his own mirror and not even a twelve-year-old could push him out of that space. "Doing girly things makes girls like ya', don't it?"

"No, it makes them think you're one of them," Cameron responded very angrily, and Charlie looked up in the mirror to make eye-contact

with the four boys on the windowsill through the glass, so they could all give their usual '*what is he even talking about?*' look to one another. They'd all become quite familiar with using it with each other.

"Riiight," Charlie said, "And you know a lot about girls, Dick?" Cameron didn't even dignify the use of that horrible nickname with any kind of response. He refused to go by his first name in any capacity because he hated it being used like that. Charlie was his worst enemy.

"If I was a girl, I'd love a guy who was a little musically inclined," Pitts said, facing the window. He exhaled on the glass and started tracing a picture. While their friends were getting ready, he would draw and then tap Meeks until he finally guessed what it was he had drawn. Once he got Meeks' attention this time, he said, "Hint: annoying."

"Hmm, I'm going to need another hint," Meeks said after carefully examining the drawing. It was a stick figure with not that many details besides a very evil expression, an angry cloud above the head, and a speech bubble with words that Meeks couldn't even read, but had to assume were offensive. "And yeah, don't girls like being serenaded and all that cheesy stuff?"

"I would, if I was a girl," Knox agreed and then turned his head to see what it was that Pitts was drawing. Anything that Meeks couldn't get first try must've been horrifying to look at, so Knox wanted to see. "What *is* that?"

Pitts' glared at the accusatory tone of Knox's words and added a few more details, prompting all the other boys on the windowsill to pay extra attention to the additions. Still, when Pitts was finished, they all sat back with confused looks. Pitts rolled his eyes in annoyed disappointment that his friends didn't appreciate his abilities and said, "Hint: dramatic."

"Species: human?" Neil asked, hoping that the drawing hadn't been there long enough to leave a permanent smear on the window. He liked having a calming time in the showers, and if that thing was still there next time he came in, he'd never sleep again. "Art skill: none?"

"Hey, Neil, be nice!" Charlie scolded as if he ever cared about being nice. He wandered over to the windowsill, his tie still horribly untied despite him taking absolutely the longest time to get dressed. Neil almost thought he entirely intended to wear his tie out to their showcase like that. Charlie jumped between the boys on the

windowsill, using Meeks' and Knox's shoulders as steadying hand rests as he squinted at the picture. After two seconds, he'd gotten it. "Oh! It's Cameron! Gerard, I applaud your heightened ability of replication."

Cameron dropped his comb and turned around with a screech, "*What!?"* He didn't even move from his place at the sink, but he was shoved a bit to the side when he stopped using it. "Annoying and dramatic? Come on, that's so mean! Neil?"

Neil couldn't pretend he didn't agree with the drawing, and he *definitely* couldn't pretend that he hadn't become increasingly pissed off at Cameron's continued bigot-like comments, but he gave his best attempt at a smile and pushed himself off the windowsill. He picked Cameron's comb off the ground and pushed the boy who had taken his mirror out of the way so he could run it under the water. While waving the comb to get the water out of it, he nodded his head at Cameron for him to return back to the mirror. Cameron did so hesitantly—everyone was hesitant when Neil told them to do something while silent.

Neil positioned himself behind Cameron and started fluffing his hair. "Fussing over your hair is a bit girly, innit?" He saw Cameron's embarrassed expression in the mirror, and continued combing his hair, being a little rougher than he necessarily needed to be. He flicked a tiny piece of lint off of Cameron's red, linen blazer. "Making sure you look perfect and all. Trying to impress someone in the crowd?"

"Obviously not," Cameron stuttered out.

"Now, that we're talking about it," Neil went on, "Spending your nights reading and resting is a bit girly too. If you're such a *man* why aren't you out chopping down trees for our fire or something?"

"Not to mention you stand like a *total* girl," Charlie added, leaning against where Neil had been previously sitting with his arms crossed. He leaned like that a lot. Those comments got a few snickers from the boys that still lingered in the bathrooms with them, and that's when Cameron tried to whip around and say something, but Neil held him firmly in his place. "Not that it's a bad thing. I love girls and *everything* they do."

Meeks and Knox shared an uncomfortable look, Neil noticed, at Charlie's accentuation of the word 'everything' and Neil mimicked it. He didn't like anything Charlie implied ever when he started sounding like he was speaking in italics. Pitts was trying to hold back a fit of

laughter from the torment on Cameron, so he really didn't have time to notice what kind of things Charlie actually wanted to be talking about.

"Thas' true," Neil said and finished off Cameron's hair, throwing his comb into the sink and turning around, walking straight up to Charlie and dealing with his *stupid* tie. He did it so well that Charlie might've not been able to get it off when they were going to bed that night. "Plus it's for Christmas. It's basically like church, and if church is one thing, it's definitely *not* girly. Does the church even like women?"

"Maybe," Charlie shrugged and straightened down his tie, but evened that out by popping his collar and ruffling his hair. Charlie wasn't even wearing a blazer, just a white dress shirt with slightly longer sleeves. God forbid Charlie Dalton ever look nice when someone actually wanted him to. He'd dress nicer if they were going to the dump. "Wouldn't know, I don't frequent Catholic churches. I'm Jewish."

Meeks stopped and looked at him. "You're *Jewish*?"

"Yeah, what's so shocking about that?"

"My cousins are Jewish," Meeks said, "You don't—You don't even eat Kosher! Why are you singing in our show to commemorate the birth of Jesus Christ?"

"Well, Jesus was a cool dude," Charlie shrugged again, "Pretty sure out of everything Catholic, he liked women the most. If people wanted to sing a bunch of songs about how I'm the best and I didn't *exactly* know what the hell they were talking about, I still wouldn't stop em.'"

Knox was entranced. "Do you speak Yiddish? Or—Or Hebrew?"

Charlie walked up to Knox and put his hands firmly on both of Knox's shoulders and stared him right in the eyes, "Esn deyn hoyzn."

Knox's eyes twinkled. "What does it mean?"

"Sorry." Charlie patted Knox's shoulders and pulled back. "Can't tell you. Family secret."

"Hey, Perry!" A voice yelled from the opening of the showers and Neil looked over his shoulder to see Jeffery Anderson yelling for him. "Tell your friends to hurry up and get in line!" Then he disappeared as quickly as he had appeared and Neil's stare landed back on his friends.

"Hurry up?" He said with a questioning tone, wondering why Jeffery hadn't just yelled at all of them instead of making him tell his friends off. Somehow, even with his lack of confidence in his own sentence, the other boys listened and left the showers, leaving just Neil and Charlie behind. Charlie had the ugliest smirk on his face. "What did you tell him?" Neil asked him with disappointment.

"I told him to eat his pants," Charlie laughed out, "It's the only thing I know how to say in Yiddish."

"So 'eat your pants' in Yiddish..." Neil started, "And 'bitch' in Spanish."

"And 'my house is your house!'" Charlie yelled in reminder, "I know how to say that too!"

"Right, right, I'm sorry." Neil rolled his eyes.

"And..." Charlie said, "Ton mère est un cheval. Thas' French."

"And it means...?"

"Well, I can't tell you all my secrets!"

"Why do you know every language *except* Latin?"

"You know what? I got Spanish, Yiddish, and French, and Meeks' gets Latin and German." Charlie asked, holding up his fingers and putting one down each time he said another language. Neil couldn't argue with such a system, so they caught up with their friends and shuffled into the room before the main hall.

Neil was nervous to say the least. He didn't realize he would ever have to do something his father would directly have to watch him succeed at, and he wasn't sure that he would enjoy seeing Neil *sing* anyway. Mr. Perry was an adult Cameron with much, much worse views, but Neil hoped since he wouldn't be the only one doing it that his father would be able to get past it. He also didn't particularly want to see his father just yet. He'd only mentally prepared for Christmas break, and these two events were way too close together for his liking.

"Hey." Knox bumped into Neil with his shoulder, snapping Neil back into reality. Knox didn't look any different from any other day because he usually wore rather fancy blazers, but his hair had a lot of product in it that Neil didn't even know he owned. Knox looked like a Greaser, all he needed was the leather jacket, and Neil thought the only person who would enjoy that look on Knox would be Charlie. "You alright?"

Neil nodded his head. "Yeah, yeah... just running through lyrics in my head."

"S'alright, Neil," Knox said, "We're all here... if you mess up, I mean, we'll be saying the right stuff still."

"Right," Neil responded, looking at Knox, knowing that is not really what he meant at all. "Thanks."

"Course, man, let's go be girls."

It flashed before Neil's eyes. He couldn't distinguish the time difference from when he was standing in the back room to when he was in front of his father, hearing compliment sandwiches about his performance. Apparently, he had a great voice (not sure how his father could hear that specifically), but his posture was not nearly as straight as the furthest boy down the left. Neil didn't really need to guess who that boy must've been, he knew it was Jeffery Anderson, but he let his father go on and on about how he could've done a little bit better. Neil's mother didn't say much, just gave him a little pat, a late happy birthday wish, and disappeared into the evening like she usually did, leaving Neil with his father.

Neil could've handled that, really, thinking about how Charlie would be making fun of Cameron's squeaky soprano voice for the rest of the night, probably mimicking a Beethoven melody in the shrill tones, cheered him up in any situation. But apparently cleaning chalkboards wasn't enough for Mr. Levinsky, because Neil quickly discovered that he had let Mr. Nolan know of his 'interruption' and that message had promptly been passed onto his father. Neil could imagine his father at his office desk *steaming* just waiting for the chance to tell him off.

Neil got the whole spiel he expected. How careless and rude he was for walking into the practice, how forgetful and irresponsible it was not to sign up for extracurriculars at the beginning of the year, and how absolutely disrespectful it was then he didn't check with his father first. Neil had to make eye contact with his father, afraid of what would happen if he didn't, but from the side of his eye he could see Charlie and Knox waiting for him. He waved them away with his hand at his side. Not only did he not want his father to somehow go off on his friends too, but he didn't want them seeing the way Neil was about to cry. Apparently to make up for this atrocity he had committed, starting next semester, he was to assist Mr. Levinsky in organizing and cleaning around the debate club classroom. It wasn't the worst punishment, but that didn't mean Neil wanted to do it.

"Yes, sir," Neil responded to these directions, then his father put a hand on his shoulder and patted him like he was an obedient dog.

"That's my boy," He said in a less angry tone, "Now, I'll see you at Christmas, stay outta' trouble."

"Of course, father."

Then his father was gone as quick as he was there, leaving Neil in the corner to compose himself before he attempted to go back to the dorms. He thought sitting in the showers to cry during the middle of the night when no one else was there sounded like a good idea, but it was too early for that. Instead, he looked up to watch all the other kids get talked to by their families. Obviously, no parents were *ideal* if they were sending their kids to Welton boarding school, but Neil couldn't help but envy the genuine smiles he saw on some of the other kids faces. Like Jeffery Anderson, cheesing so hard Neil wasn't sure if the light in the room was coming from the chandeliers or from his smile.

It was what was next to Jeffery that caught Neil's interest.

Or who, he guessed, felt kind of rude to call the boy that stood next to Jeffery a 'what.' He was so much shorter than Jeffery it was hard for Neil to notice he was even there, but Jeffery's parents also seemed to be easily ignoring his presence and he was right next to them. He looked the opposite of how Jeffery looked, like he'd just found a cool bug on the ground and someone had stepped on it. Neil could only see his furrowed eyebrows because he was looking at the ground like that was the only way his neck actually bent. Neil felt horrible, instantly, because it felt like he was looking in a mirror.

He looked around for any of his friends, and when he didn't see any, he started slowly approaching the other side of the room. Eventually, when the two adults walked away, with Jeffery following behind them, Neil picked up the pace. They left the other boy behind, lucky for Neil, and he eventually made it there and stood in front of him. He wasn't wearing a Welton uniform, but Neil could've already guessed he didn't go to Welton. He recognized pretty much everybody at that point, and he didn't recognize this kid. Maybe from the very first day, maybe he'd been there with Jeffery and his parents too, but Neil didn't notice him there either. He shuffled up slowly, inching his feet into the view of this boy.

He got too close or moved too quickly, because the boy's head shot up

in absolute shock that someone was approaching him. Neil was a head taller than him, making it perfect for his chin to get absolutely cracked when the kid lifted his head at the speed of light. He tried not to make any sound or curse too loud, but he couldn't help it. It kind of hurt. The only reason he was able to resist was because he noticed that the other boy was holding his head in what seemed to be worse pain than Neil was feeling.

"I'm so sorry!" Neil shouted, attempting to rush forward to check the boy's head, but when he saw how fast he went to avoid Neil, he didn't try again. "I—I'm sorry."

"S'okay," The kid mumbled and rubbed his head where Neil's chin had nearly impaled his skull. "Wasn't lookin'."

"Are you—" The question died in Neil's mouth, he had the weirdest feeling he shouldn't ask about Jeffery. "You don't go to Welton, right?"

"No," He responded quietly, "Balincrest."

"Oh, cool, cool," Neil said, "I just... sorry for... I saw you across the hall and you looked kinda' upset, so I thought that..."

Suddenly the kid looked up at him, in a manner that didn't injure both of them, and Neil realized just how much of a mirror it felt like he was looking into. This kid's eyes were sad, but Neil could see that they were programmed to pretend to be happy in a matter of seconds. Neil's eyes were programmed to do that too, and he didn't like the look of it on anyone else. He must've been staring too intensely, because the kid looked away from him. "Oh."

"I thought I'd just... see if you were okay?" The more Neil spoke, the more nervous he got. "I'm Neil. I—I go to Welton... uh, obviously. And I just—I don't—so are you? Okay, I mean. Are you okay? You seemed real bummed."

Neil's rambling made him want to die, but it pulled a small, tiny chuckle from the boy in front of him, and then everything felt better. "M' fine." Neil was nervously looked up at again. "Thanks."

"How about you?" Neil asked, "What's your name?"

The faint smile dissipated and Neil's heart felt horrible seeing it happen. "I gotta' go."

"Oh," Neil said, "I can walk with you, if you want?"

There must've been something in Neil's face, because he somehow knew that this boy would've said no to anyone else, but he just nodded and started walking away, allowing Neil to follow behind him. He walked like he was rather familiar with Welton's layout despite not going there, and in a short time Neil saw Jeffery and his parents in the distance. They looked up and saw them approaching and Mrs. Anderson had a small expression of relief.

"There you are, Todd!" She yelled and welcomed the boy back over into their little family group.

Neil chewed on that name for a while. *Todd*.

He was snapped back into it by Mrs. Anderson suddenly turning her attention to Neil. "And who might you be, young man?"

"Oh, this is Neil," Jeffery stepped into rescue and Neil saw Todd look up just a slight bit. "He's the same grade as Todd."

"Ah, well then maybe you can convince good ol' Todd to try out Welton, then?" Mr. Anderson said with a joking, cheerful tone.

"Ha, maybe," Neil responded and then looked to Jeffery, whose eyes were telling him that he needed to get out of there as soon as he could. "I hafta' go make sure that my roommate's not getting into any trouble, but nice meeting you."

"Pleasure," Mrs. Anderson smiled back. Neil tried to catch Todd's eyes, but Todd refused to look up at him again, so he trudged away after another glance at Jeffery.

He felt for that kid, and he couldn't say he didn't know what it was because he knew what it was. Todd reminded Neil too much of, well, Neil. He wanted to help, he always had such an urge to help, but if Todd didn't want his help, there wasn't much Neil could do about it. Todd didn't go to Welton, and unless he planned on kidnapping Jeffery and forcing him to take Neil to the Anderson's, he was out of luck. He just hoped that wasn't that last time he ever saw Todd and he hoped the next time he did see him, he looked a bit happier.

Chapter End Notes

I was too eager to start including Todd so I thought that it made sense he would be there for Jeffery's performances or something.

Also we're gonna pretend the movie was set in the 80's because I keep referencing things that did not exist in the 50's so lmao. Also every comment ever is so sweet and I love everyone

Fourth—Because I Want To

Chapter Summary

> Back from Christmas break and Neil is dealing with having to be the debate team's maid.

Chapter Notes

> Two chapters in one day aka non consistent word count but haha idrc im sorry contents content

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Neil, my boy, back from the war!"

Neil felt someone jump on his back from behind and he went stumbling to the ground. The feeling was all too familiar, so he turned around and slammed Charlie, who was still on his back, right down to the floorboards himself. Charlie stopped fighting and let Neil just lay on top of him for a couple of seconds and Neil instantly became worried to what Charlie had to be planning because he never went down without a fight. Eventually, after minutes of just laying on the ground, Charlie pushed Neil off of him and sent him flying right toward their door. Neil landed at the feet of someone, and he had a temporary heart attack thinking it was staff, but he looked up and saw it was just Knox. His terrified look turned into a smirk as he grabbed Knox by the ankles and dragged him straight into him and Charlie's room.

Knox was really easy to toss around, so he landed in a heap with Neil and Charlie in a matter of seconds. This turned out to be a bad thing for Neil because Charlie convinced Knox to be on his side, which was rather easy considering Neil was the reason he was down on the ground in the first place, and they both teamed up to beat the crap out of Neil. They were all dying in fits of laughter and Neil felt like the past two weeks of Christmas break was nothing more than a break keeping him away from his friends. Not an awkward vacation to spend with his horrible parents, just a break away from his friends.

"I see the war has taken its toll, good friend," Charlie said, decreeing his victory and hopping up onto his feet. He helped Neil up and then clapped him on the shoulder. Neil had never seen Charlie look so ecstatic. He was worried he'd had a miserable Christmas break too.

Not that it was really Christmas break for Charlie. It was kind of just a random two weeks he got to spend away from school. Maybe sitting there and thinking about all the presents his friends were opening was what had made him upset. Either way, Neil was just as ecstatic to see him. "I hope not too much."

"You should've seen the battles!" Knox cried out dramatically from the floor, clawing forward as he hadn't gotten up yet. "The bloody, bloody battles. I'll never forget."

"That's why I told you to stay at home base, cadet!" Neil said and dropped back close to Knox's face. "But you never listen!"

"We both got dishonorably discharged, didn't we?"

"I think I'm just gonna go back to my room." The boys looked up to see Meeks standing in the doorway with Pitts right behind him. Both looked mildly horrified at what they'd walked into, but its not like they were surprised. They knew their friends. They'd expected to walk in on something weird like this, especially if it was Neil, Charlie, and Knox, but what they walked in on every time was always different and could never be predicted in the slightest. "I feel like we interrupted a moment."

"Have you brought the medals?" Charlie jumped over his friends on the ground and grabbed onto Meeks, refusing to break the scene Knox and Neil had set in motion. "The medals, Meeks, these men deserve medals!"

"No, sir," Meeks responded, "I've got no medals. These two were dishonorably discharged."

"We fought for you!" Knox yelled, and then soon Meeks was on the ground too. Charlie came along, still being clung to him, and eventually Pitts was there too and all five of them were wrestling around on the ground. Right up until Cameron appeared in the doorway and yelled at them to stop being idiots. Neil wanted to be angry at him for ruining the fun, but honestly without Cameron, there was a good chance all of them would get in a lot of trouble for everything they did. Of course, none of the other boys seemed to appreciate that, and they all called Cameron a buzzkill. Pitts pushed him back to their room and Meeks dragged Knox back to theirs. Apparently Meeks had been searching for Knox to clean up the mess he'd made in their room in the short time Knox was alone after Meeks had left for break, and Knox had run right to Neil and Charlie's room.

"So, is your dad still on about that punishment?" Charlie asked, closing the door to their room and then hopping onto his bed stomach-first, making his mattress creak a little more than Neil would've liked. One day Charlie was gonna break his bed, and Neil wasn't prepared to deal with it.

"Of course he is," Neil said and sat down on Charlie's bed. Mr. Perry had not let up on the fact Neil was to be the debate teacher's little helper for the rest of the year. The only good part was that it basically solidified him a place in debate next year despite him only being in the fifth grade. Wrong equation, right answer, Neil liked to think of it. "Promise not to have too much fun without me?"

"I promise to have *more* fun," Charlie snickered and then reached under his pillow, where he had apparently already stashed something. He pulled out a thin stack of papers with a torn cover and tossed it behind his shoulder at Neil. It hit him and he reached behind and grabbed it, seeing it was a book. Charlie Dalton had snuck a book under his pillow and then given it to Neil. "You were always complaining about the boring books in English. My dad's gotta ton of weird, controversial books, so I stole the first one I got my hands on."

Neil stared at the cover. *Lolita*.

"It'll probably scar ya'." Charlie admitted, "Maybe save it for eleven?"

"What am I supposed to read till' then?"

"Shakespeare?" Charlie shrugged, "I dunno."

They sat in silence for a moment, and Neil decided to shove the book under his own pillow, saving it for later as Charlie had suggested. Maybe later he'd read the synopsis or something, but he was worried about Charlie's father's collection of controversial books. While Neil was remaking his bed, Charlie sat up.

"I've been meaning to ask..." He started, "The day of the concert. Were you alright?"

Neil temporarily froze, but regained himself to finish off his bed and smooth it down. He refused to turn around and make eye-contact with Charlie. He didn't want to talk about it ever, let alone right now. "Yeah, I was good."

"Are you sure, dude?" Charlie stood up and walked behind Neil. Neil could feel him hovering behind. "I know your dad is a hardass

sometimes, so I just wanted to check."

That awfully reminded Neil of what he had did right after the talk with his father. He hadn't stopped thinking about Todd all Christmas break. He even considered looking the Andersons up in the phone book to start being penpals with Jeffery or something. Neil fell back on his bed, hating himself for being so worried. Jeffery seemed so happy with their family, so why was Todd upset? Why didn't Todd come to Welton? Maybe it was just the fact Todd happened to be the unfortunate sap Neil laid his eyes on right after getting berated by his father, but Neil couldn't help being concerned.

"Did you know Andersons got a brother?" Neil asked, refusing to tell Charlie whether or not he was okay again.

"He does?" Charlie asked, "And he doesn't go to Welton?"

"No," Neil said, "Dunno' why."

"Oh," Charlie said and laid down next to Neil. "Well, what's it to ya'?"

"Dunno'," Neil repeated, and that was true, so at least he wasn't lying to anyone.

That's all that was said about Todd Anderson that night and for the rest of the year. Neil tried to focus on his studies and his upcoming position in the debate club. Luckily for him, Mr. Levinsky just pawned him off to Jeffery, so Jeffery was in charge of telling him what to do. Depending on what mood Jeffery was in, Neil usually got off pretty easy. Maybe some sweeping, maybe just taking out the trash, but some days it was brutal. Neil wasn't sure what pissed off the thirteen-year-old so much sometimes, but he was the one who suffered when it did happen. A day a few weeks after they came back from break was one of those days. Something was off with Jeffery, and Neil had no idea what, but it resulted in him scrubbing down and sanitizing every single desk and chair in Mr. Levinsky's classroom while the debate team stood and did some type of exercises.

Jeffery was nice enough to everyone else, still a little pissy, but never as harsh toward them as he was toward Neil. Neil just figured he was easier to abuse. It was sort of like Jeffery was the master of the house, the debate team was his kids, and Neil was his maid. Which was weird because Jeffery was only the vice president. Neil didn't even actually know who or where the president was, but whoever he was, Jeffery was doing his job and a half. Neil listened to each debate, having to hold back laughs occasionally. Small practice debates were never on

anything too serious and Neil found it hard to keep it together listening to so many older boys seriously argue about whether or not they should ban lotion in the boy's dorms.

Every boy there was much older than him. The closest to his age was Jeffery and he was still three years older than him. Most of the population of the debate club was seventh and eighth graders, and Neil discovered that seventh and eighth grade boys rarely made a joke that *didn't* involve something sexual. Neil just tried to tune it out, and when Jeffery was in one of his moods, he was either super sexist or wouldn't tolerate anything anyone said. Neil thought maybe the next debate should be about whether or not Jeffery Anderson was sane. It must've been hard being the smartest kid in the entire universe, but still no reason to be such a douche.

"Neil, gonna clean all those chairs or just the one?" Jeffery's voice snapped Neil back into reality. All he did was mumble something in response and move on to scrubbing down the desk. They were dirty. Dirty enough that Neil thought they must've not been cleaned since back when Welton had graduated five boys. Dust was in his lungs with every swipe of his rag and he had to get up and replace his water about every five desks. Eventually he finished, emptied out all his water, put back all the supplies, and wandered back to the debate classroom. All the other boys were grabbing their stuff and preparing to go, so Neil decided to ask Jeffery if he too had the all-clear to leave. "No."

"Huh?" Neil didn't mean for it to come off so bluntly, but he was a little mad. Meeks and Pitts had gotten some of their radio to work, and if they all sat in there they could hear a single second of a nearby radio station, and that was something Neil didn't really want to miss out on. "Sorry, I mean...—no, I mean huh?"

"I need to talk to you for a second."

Neil didn't like *ever* being told that.

Once all the boys had gone, Jeffery sat down on Mr. Levinsky's desk and patted the spot next to him. Neil hesitantly stepped forward and sat down as well, really not liking the energy in the room. But he was immensely surprised when Jeffery just sighed very loudly and put his head in his hands.

"I'm sorry," Jeffery said, "For being such a dick."

Neil didn't say anything for a while. He didn't know what to say. He

wasn't aware that Jeffery actually knew that he was being a dick, and he was sure as hell no one else had randomly decided to tell Welton's golden boy that he was occasionally the biggest jerk.

"S'alright," Neil eventually said quietly. It was not alright. Neil actually wanted to tackle Jeffery to the ground and make him sniff up all the dust Neil had been dealing with for the past month, but he wasn't about to exact his revenge right as soon as Jeffery was going through self-realization. "Didn't notice."

"Just family stuff, you know?" He said and ruffled his hands through his hair. "You saw Todd—he's... he's a hard brother to have."

There went Neil's plan to never talk about Todd again, but what exactly was he supposed to do when his own brother was bringing it up? Neil's anger flared back to life at Jeffery's words. If anything, *he* must've been a hard brother to have. He was a hard *classmate* to have, so no way Todd was the more difficult sibling. Either way, it wasn't an excuse to treat Neil and everyone else like absolutely bags of trash. Neil had family problems too, and he *relished* being in the company of others. A dislike for Jeffery Neil didn't even know was there started growing in the pit of his stomach.

"My parents just want him to go to Welton, and he doesn't wanna," Jeffery went on, "Said it'd be horrible to be at the same school as me. Said he gets ignored enough at home."

"Well, does he?" Neil pressed. Todd looked sad for a reason. Neil wanted to scream that Jeffery was the one smiling with their parents. He'd walked off with them without Todd at the showcase.

"No!" Jeffery said and then calmed down, "No, he doesn't. He just *feels* like he does. He's just—he doesn't like the fact I do more than him, but he's only ten, like you, and you don't do a lot either, but I know you're gonna. He's the same way. Todd's gonna do cool things, but not if he keeps convincing himself he's living in some sort of shadow."

Neil had never wanted to scream more, but all he said was, "Yeah."

"But my parents got him," Jeffery said, picking at his nails in extreme nervousness, "My parents got em' to come to Welton next year, and I can't stop worryin' about it. I just wanted to ask that when he comes, can you please look out for him? He won't let me, I know he won't, and he seemed to warm up to you at the showcase."

"He didn't say a whole sentence to me," Neil objected. He didn't want

to do anything Jeffery told him to anymore. Jeffery was the reason he got yelled at when they were at the showcase. He was the indirect reason Neil was so upset and noticed Todd being so upset. If not for Jeffery, Neil's ten-year-old mind would be on the prank he needed to pull on Meeks and Pitts to get them back for when they smeared jelly on his and Charlie's pillows, not on whether or not a kid he barely knew was okay. "I doubt he's warmed up."

"He usually doesn't talk to anyone," Jeffery responded, "It doesn't matter. You're in his grade, and I want to know if you'll look out for him?"

"Of course I'll look out for him," Neil said angrily, like Jeffery had accused him of *not* doing so rather than asking him *to* do it. He got up off the desk and straightened out his uniform tie, barely casting a glance Jeffery's way. "But not cause' you asked me tuh. Because I wanna." Then he stormed out of the classroom.

Chapter End Notes

Protective Neil Protective Neil Protective Neil

End of Fourth—Birthday Parties and Anxiety

Chapter Summary

> The boys celebrate Charlie's birthday right before they all have to start preparing to get ready for the end of their first year together at Welton.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Charlie's birthday was near the end of April, and that was the last time Neil remembered being happy for longer than an hour for the rest of the school year. There wasn't much any of the fourth graders could get Charlie for his birthday, so Charlie suggested they just do his favorite thing with him—break rules. Of course, Cameron was *not* invited. He wouldn't have just not come, he would've ratted them out entirely, but Pitts had some important test to study for and couldn't come either, so he promised to keep Cameron locked down in their room so he wouldn't even find out the others were going anywhere. That was his birthday present to Charlie, and Charlie promised to buy him a beer if they were still alive by the legal drinking age.

Neil and Knox were *both* worried about Charlie's implication that they weren't going to make it to twenty-one.

Past lights out, Knox and Meeks crept from their room to Charlie and Neil's. Neil left the planning up to them while he curled himself in the corner of the bed and read over a study guide Jeffery had lent him. He'd been relying heavily on Jeffery lately to know what direction he wanted to further his schooling in, and he didn't like it at all. He wanted to make his own choices, he did, but he figured it couldn't hurt to start on the same path just a *little* bit. At the same time he was leeching tips off of him, Neil was avoiding Jeffery too. He didn't want Todd thinking for even a second that Neil was on Jeffery's side. Because he wasn't. The more family drama Neil was let it on, the less he even considered being empathetic for Jeffery.

The study guide was ripped out of his hands and replaced with Knox's face. Knox had shown a growing concern for Neil over the past couple of months he'd been laboring for the debate club, but he never pressed Neil into telling him anything. Neil wasn't sure if it was because he was giving Neil space or if he just truly did not know how to deal with

a friend being upset. Either way, he was alright with not sharing how he felt to anyone. "Are you gonna let your hair down, professor?"

Neil rolled his eyes and shoved Knox's cheek as far as he could. "Of course I am. You think I don't know how to have fun?"

"Don't know, Neil," Charlie said tauntingly from his bed, "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you're becoming a *real* Cameron."

Meeks and Knox 'oo'd like that was the meanest thing Charlie could've possibly said. He was a new man after all. Ten years old and a outright savage. Neil rolled his eyes again and tucked his study guide under his pillow next to where he'd been keeping Charlie's illegal, questionable book. He had attempted to read the synopsis on the back and decided that Charlie was definitely right about probably wanting to wait a year to read it. Then Neil reached into his desk drawer and pulled out four thin-looking sticks, waving them around in his friends faces and then shoving them in his pocket out of reach.

"Neil, you *bastard*!" Charlie shouted and attempted to claw the sticks out of his pocket, but Neil kept turning just the right way so Charlie couldn't reach. "You got em'!"

"I said I would," Neil said like it was obvious, then he looked over at Meeks and Knox. "Crazy the things the older boys will do for ya' if you hide their cigs."

Knox pressed a hand to his chest and gasped. "You had cigarettes!?"

Neil flushed a bit, remembering how poorly he'd overreacted when Knox had told him the same thing on his own birthday and mumbled, "Shut up."

"Are we gonna go or not?" Meeks asked impatiently, "We have a short window of time."

"Onward we shall go!" Charlie said and pointed out the window, into the distance of the woods. They had no real plan after they actually made it out of the building, but they were too excited to actually care about it. This was the first time they'd attempted to sneak *out* of Welton and not just their rooms. Meeks shushed Charlie viciously and then they all donned their cloaks and shuffled out into the dark, creaky hallways of their boarding school. Since they were small enough, they had figured out some complicated way to maneuver around *The Chupacabra*—Charlie had decided that nickname for the guard dog was gonna stick—and successfully make it to the bottom

floor with no real problems.

There wasn't much four ten year old boys could do at one am—was what they all had to keep reminding Charlie when he kept suggesting they sneak into the nearest town. No shops or anything they would be *allowed* in would be open, so none of them knew what Charlie thought they were gonna do when they got there. Instead, they snuck to the end of Welton's grounds to the lake and climbed up on the dock. It was so dark they could barely see one another's faces, but then Knox lit a match, appearing over Meeks' shoulder and scaring him into a stumble. Charlie and Knox laughed as Neil helped Meeks back up, and *then* laughed at him, and Meeks shoved them all away.

Neil pulled the four sticks out of his pocket and handed one to each of his friends. Charlie opted for fireworks, but Neil's common sense and the older boys' range of capability prevented that from happening, so Neil had gotten them each a sparkler. A little underwhelming, but still something. Charlie shoved his to Knox's match. "Light me up, Kuh-nox."

"Don't mind if I do, Sir Dalton," Knox responded, lighting up Charlie's sparkler, having to step back when it started flickering. The light revealed Charlie's ecstatic features, and Neil realized it didn't matter what kind of illegal destined-for-the-fourth-of-July thing he got for Charlie. Charlie would've been happy if Neil handed him a giant boulder he could chuck into the lake. He was happy with anything as long as he got to do something with it. It was easy being his friend when he could make a bunch of something out of a lot of nothing.

"Sir Dalton," Charlie smiled, "I could get used to that."

Meeks leaned his own sparkler forward and lit it himself on Knox's match. "Please don't."

"Yeah," Knox agreed as his sparkler lit up and revealed his smile. "It's just for tonight."

"Works for me." Charlie looked across the group at his best friend and realized he couldn't actually see him. "Neil, are you a mouse or a man? Light it up!"

Knox sensed Neil's hesitation and handed the match over to him, and Neil appreciated it. It was easy being Knox's friend too. You never really had to tell him how you were feeling. He kind of just always knew. Neil grabbed it and took a breath before lighting up his sparkler and putting out the match. He dropped it to the dock and Charlie

laughed out a laugh of pure glee, running back and forth on the dock with his diminishing sparkler. Neil finally loosened up and staring chasing him around, set on poking Charlie dangerously with the end of his own sparkler as revenge for that *horrible* birthday kiss back in November. Obviously that resulted in Knox chasing Neil to *keep* him from burning a hole into Charlie's cheek, and soon the three of them were running circles around the dock while Meeks stomped his feet, trying to create some rhythmic for whatever the hell was going on.

"I don't think Sir Dalton is gonna get very far!" He suddenly narrated as Charlie had somehow cornered himself on the very edge of the dock. "But Sir Perry seems to be having some trouble too!" Neil had indeed backed Charlie up, but Knox was right behind him. If he made a move, Knox would be on him in a matter of seconds.

"Hey, just Sir Dalton!" Charlie pointed at Meeks. "It's my day!" His sparkler was nearing it's end.

Meeks rolled his eyes. "*Fine*. Neil's in a tough spot. If he attacks Sir Dalton, the peasant Knox might have his head!"

"Now, why am I a peasant?" Knox asked in displeasure, giving Neil time to execute the plan that he had just come up with.

"Get my head for *this*, peasant Knox!" Neil shouted behind him and then surged forward and tackled Charlie right off the side of the dock, crashing them both into the absolutely freezing lake water. Charlie was laughing even before they'd been fully submerged under the surface of the water. Their sweaters were much heavier soaked with water than they were both used to, and they both sunk a little bit as their clothes weighed them down. Neil dared opening his eyes in the disgusting water just to see Charlie's blurry form thrashing as much as Neil thought he was. Eventually, they both regained their senses, swam closer to where they knew the dock was, and pulled themselves above the water by clinging to the top of it. "Oh my god!"

"Oh my god is right!" Charlie laughed in complete glee and shoved some lake water into Neil's eyes. Then he whipped his hair out of his face, soaking Meeks with water most definitely on purpose. "Ha! That was great!" Neil was entirely suspicious at the lack of mentioning revenge in Charlie's laughter, but eventually put his worry aside as he saw Charlie try clawing at Knox's ankles to pull him into the water with them. He didn't have much leverage trying to grab Knox while also having to keep himself afloat, so he hoisted himself entirely on the deck and then shed himself of his sweater and shoes, so he

wouldn't drown next time he hit the water. "Come on Knoxy! Give me a hug!"

"Ugh," Knox groaned, having to start running away again just to get away from Charlie. "That's so *gross*."

"What?" Charlie stopped and pouted. "Hugging me?"

"No, *lake water*," Knox clarified with a laugh and Charlie looked almost relieved. The moon had brightened itself up just for Charlie's birthday so they could see each other easier. It was a full moon that night, and Neil had a faint childish worry that he was going to transform into a merman next time he took a shower. "You haven't even got your birthday kisses yet, Dalton, ten of em'!"

"Good thing Cam's not here, eh?" Charlie asked with an eyebrow raise. "He'd call a priest."

"For you, someone should," Meeks agreed, "But only cause' you might be possessed."

"Do *both* of you wanna take a dip in the lake?"

Neil didn't really know how it happened, but suddenly he was being pushed under water again. One second he was watching Charlie wag his head around and dry himself off like a wet dog onto the other boys and the second he was being jumped on top of. He figured this was Charlie's revenge for the initial tackle, but Charlie had so much momentum, Neil actually felt the bottom of the lake on his back when he finally started floating upward again. Neil opened his eyes and Charlie had the stupidest grin on his face, and that was the last bit of true happiness Neil felt for the rest of the school year.

An hour later, they were back inside the building. Knox and Meeks tip-toeing off to their dorm while Charlie and Neil tried to take the quietest showers of their lives because they didn't want to get hypothermia and then have to explain how they had gotten hypothermia. They chucked their clothes in the communal laundry basket for their hall, hoping no one would question why they were so wet. The showers were never warm, but Neil and Charlie discovered if you were the only ones using water in the whole building, they were almost scalding. Charlie tried to use the shower right next to Neil as a joke, but he got shoved all the way to the other end of the room.

"Good birthday, Charles?" Neil asked, making sure that his face was clear of any scrapes, marks, or dirt. It was a valuable asset. He

couldn't mess up that golden boy smile he was working on.

"Better than last year," Charlie responded, and Neil heard a lot of water hitting the ground, figuring that Charlie was ringing out his hair and making sure there was no dirt in it. That seemed like most Charlie-thing to do first in the shower.

"What d'ya do last year?"

"I dunno. Slept," Charlie shrugged, "Went to class. But now I went for a dip in the lake *and* I get to go to class."

"Oo," Neil said sarcastically, "Exciting."

"Least we pulled your attention away from those stupid study guides," Charlie said, "You haven't stopped lookin' at them since Anderson lent em' to you."

"Well, I gotta study."

"You know they don't really care about your fourth grade grades, right?" Charlie asked, "Like colleges and stuff. Stop stressin' yourself out, man."

"That means I shouldn't study?" Neil snapped, and he had extreme deja vu, except the last time he was in this situation, he had been on the other side of the debate, making him heavily consider that maybe Charlie was right. He sighed. "I don't wan' my father to make me do summer school."

"Well, that's—holy crap, Neil!" Charlie interrupted himself with a shout, worrying Neil so much he whipped around to face him, even if he didn't want to particularly make eye contact with Charlie while in the showers. Neil looked down and noticed that as soon as he'd turned, the water at his feet had a faint red tint and his back was absolutely *stinging*. Charlie grabbed him and turned him back around and poked at his back and Neil hissed out in pain. "Your back got scratched *up*, dude!"

"Really?" Neil asked and reached over his shoulder behind his neck. He felt what Charlie was talking about. Most of the scratches were thin lines or small patches of irritated skin, but the one scratched in the middle, right under the nape of his neck, was a *gash* and Neil had no idea how he hadn't felt it when it had happened. He didn't particularly care since he didn't hurt that much, so he shrugged. "Musta' happened second time we went under. No big deal."

"No big deal?" Charlie said, "Man, if you saw this thing—Here." He soaped up his first finger and started washing particular spots on Neil's back, making them both significantly uncomfortable, but Charlie was determined to not let this apparently *horrifying* wound get infected. After he was satisfied, they both finished up their showers and ran as fast as they could back to their room to get dressed for bed and maybe actually get some sleep before they had to wake up for class the next morning.

May was the worst month of the year by far. Everything Neil had learned throughout the entirety of the year was being shoved in his head again all at the same time while he was constantly being reminded that Welton didn't take kindly to absolute failures of children. And if Neil thought *he* was stressed, Jeffery was damn near exploding. There was no nice Jeffery ever again for the rest of the year. Just weirdly dickish, demanding Jeffery who made Neil sanitize all the door handles for some reason. On top of all his schoolwork, his extra studies, and Jeffery Anderson the debate dictator, Neil barely got anytime with his friends before he was kidnapped for the summer by his father.

At least he'd done alright on his exams. His father had told him that, and therefore didn't force any summer school on him. But it wasn't like Neil got to relax all summer either. He wasn't in contact with any of his friends—phone calls, letters, *nothing,* because his father insisted on Neil doing anything else except the things he wanted to do. If Neil wanted to play cards with his mom, his father would run in and suggest that Neil *actually* should *at least* get a jump on fifth grade vocabulary, maybe study up on the debate rules. Neil's father even tried to make him write an *essay,* but his mother actually decided to stand up for him for once and got Neil out of that one.

After his stressful end to his very first year at Welton, Neil couldn't imagine ever actually wanting to go back, but when they time came around for him to start packing up for school, he was jumping in his shoes. He'd get to see Charlie, Knox, Meeks, and Pitts again. He was even excited to hear Cameron's annoying complaints. And he'd get to be on the debate team, which was something his father had made it really hard for him to be excited about, but he found it within him again and had the biggest smile on his face when August was coming around.

On top of all of that, Neil was ecstatic to make his new friend: Todd Anderson.

Chapter End Notes

i tried writing this as quick as i could so i could actually get it up before having to go to work so sorry if there's any mistakes mwah love u

Fifth—Second First Day at Welton

Chapter Summary

The start of Neil's second year at Welton.

Tradition, Honor, Discipline, Excellence

None of it made sense to Neil anymore. Why does a school even need four pillars of greatness or whatever? Why couldn't they just have a chant... or maybe a battle cry, like all those weird public schools. Why did they have to stand and recite these four pillars like they were all part of a cult. Of course, Neil didn't say any of that or let it show on his face. He just stood and recited them after his father gave what could be interpreted as an encouraging pat on his son's shoulder. He also wasn't allowed to just *run off* as he had done his first day at Welton. He was dragged by his father to Mr. Levinsky's classroom where they were to discuss the rules and expectations of a fifth grader being allowed in the debate club.

Neil didn't get a word in. Mr. Levinsky and Mr. Perry talking was the last discussion he wanted to get involved in, but even if he had wanted to contribute anything, he would have never gotten the chance. Old men spoke too much, was all Neil got from the conversation, he was barely even listening to the rules. He'd come to the realization last year that Mr. Levinsky did close to nothing when it came to actual debate practices. Mostly, he left his trusted Jeffery Anderson in charge and left the room or he was there just to discipline anyone who did the tiniest thing wrong. Neil had chosen the *worst* day to try and join the debate club last year. It was one of the only days he was actually in his classroom.

Even after that, Neil wasn't free from his father's grasp. They took a walk around the grounds and discussed a possible timetable for Neil to get his work done in a timely manner *and* some extra credit stuff that Neil didn't even want to do. Finally, after Neil literally watched his father drive off school grounds, he ran straight to his dorm with his suitcase, seeing Charlie already on his bed reading some type of magazine that Neil had to assume was not appropriate for him to have. He jumped on him without giving him time to put down the magazine, definitely giving him a paper cut somewhere on his body, but he didn't really care. He was just happy to see one of his friends.

"God," Charlie groaned out from the weight of Neil literally crushing

his lungs. "Didn't think you missed me that much."

"Don't flatter yourself," Neil responded, though he was refusing to get up from where he had made himself comfortable on top of Charlie. "I'm so low on human interaction I coulda' hugged Mr. Nolan."

"Oh boy." Charlie then reciprocated this hug that wasn't really a hug. "You deserve this then, my man, happy to help. Did you get your debate crap figured out?"

Neil finally got off of his roommate and walked to his side of the room to begin unpacking. "Unfortunately. How was your summer?"

Charlie had grown at least two inches since the last time Neil saw him, and he was actually taller than Neil now. He still had that grimey look of a mischievous young boy, though, and that's all that really mattered to Neil. His hair was recently trimmed and Neil knew he probably was ecstatic to let it grow out annoyingly shaggy just to annoy all the teachers who couldn't really do anything about it. Their hair was one of the only things the boys had the freedom to control and, of course, Charlie Dalton was going to make of that what he could. As long as he had a comb and a bottle of hair gel, his hair was going to be perfect.

"A travesty, Neil. My summer was. A. Travesty," Charlie answered dramatically, flipping closed his magazine, which Neil most definitely noticed was a new edition of PlayBoy and he didn't even *want* to know how Charlie had gotten his hands on that. Probably his father, adding another reason to Neil's list of why Charlie's father seemed a concerning character. Charlie slid his contraband under his pillow and stood up from his bed. "My family is into camping now, apparently. I had to learn how to kayak, and thanks to you I'm not real keen on lakes."

Neil rolled his eyes. "Thanks to me? You're the one that marked up *my* back."

"It was dutiful revenge," Charlie responded, like he couldn't be accountable for the huge scar he'd left under Neil's neck. It had healed well enough but now there was a giant blotchy patch of skin there that Neil had to constantly wear collared shirts to hide. "Plus, battle scars make a guy cool. *You're welcome*."

"You're so..." Neil trailed off, not being able to decide on *what* he thought Charlie was because Charlie was too many things. "You see Knox anywhere? I gotta give him back his—whatever this is he gave

me." Neil pulled a small tube of cream out of the front pocket of his suitcase. Knox had given it to him for the exact scar him and Charlie had just been talking about. Apparently Knox used to fall off of horses *a lot* while horseback riding, so his family had gotten him this special cream to help heal his scratches. It must've been custom made for Knox's DNA make up or something because it didn't work at all on Neil's scratches, and Knox was so confident that it would.

"Last I saw him he was trying to figure out where the hell his new room is," Charlie answered, digging through Neil's suitcase and examining all his clothes like he was some sort of fashion designer. "Apparently Meeks ditched him and got a room with Pitts. Cross your fingers Knoxy doesn't end up with Cameron. He'd probably stick the same stick up his butt that he's got."

Neil shook his head with a laugh. "As if that would stop Knox from being a menace. He's friends with you after all. Put that down!" Neil clawed a pair of his underwear out of Charlie's hands and threw it back into his suitcase, just hoping Charlie wouldn't try to pick it up again.

"Aww, you think I have that much of an influence on him?" Charlie asked as if Neil had just told him that Knox was a Harvard graduate and it was all due to Charlie. Neil just gave him a look, but Charlie didn't submit to his judginess, sticking with his comment and reaching back into Neil's suitcase, thankfully avoiding the underwear this time. "Plus, don't tell em' this, but I know *exactly* where his new room is. I just avent' told him yet because it's funny watching em' run around." Charlie laughed like a true psychopath.

"Well, will you tell *me* where it is?" Neil asked and held up the tube of horseback-wound-healing cream. "He'd have a better time explaining what the hell this is if he got caught with it. I'm not rich enough to go horseback riding."

"Knoxy isn't *that* rich."

"His house has three stories and six bedrooms!"

"So what?"

"He's an only child!"

"Fine, maybe he's a little rich boy," Charlie admitted, "His room is the last one on the left."

"Thanks." Neil headed toward the door, but turned around last second and pointed at Charlie. "Stay *out* of my suitcase, Charlie."

"Why?" Charlie asked, "Hiding something?"

"No, I just don't like other people touching my underwear."

"You know what, fair enough."

Neil left his room in confidence that he'd gotten through to Charlie, and headed down the hall to Knox's new room. Neil hated to admit it, but he *really* hoped Knox hadn't got roomed with Cameron either. It'd be hard to keep trading the older boys for favors by hiding their illegal shit if *Cameron* was in the room, and as fourth graders they really depended on those favors for fun, so he didn't want Cameron to ruin it. Cameron was fine, Neil supposed, but he hoped that the stick in his butt that Charlie had mentioned had burned out over the summer or something. It was exhausting to be his friend sometimes.

Now, Neil, Knox, Meeks, and Charlie *never* knocked on each other's doors when they were going to their rooms. If they were naked or doing something weird, that sucks for them because not only did they not knock, but they rarely ever shut the door behind them. Neil was used to this kind of behavior, so when his mind caught on to the fact that he was going to Knox's room, it left his brain momentarily that Meeks was no longer Knox's roommate, even if he had just been complaining about Cameron in his head seconds before. He barged right in and was about to say something crude about the tube of cream in his hand until he looked up and noticed Knox was not in there, but someone else was.

"Oh—Todd," Neil stuttered over his words and then stumbled over his feet even if he *was* just standing still. He hid the cream behind his back, not wanting Todd to think him and Knox were weirdos trading cream with one another—which they were but Todd Anderson did not need to know that—and blushing *profusely* in the face. Todd looked the exact same as the last time Neil had seen em'. Short with bangs that covered his eyebrows and eyes, not allowing anyone to ever see his real facial expression. Except, he was now in a Welton uniform, and Neil remembered Todd was going to be there *all year*. Not just at weird performances and award ceremonies to watch his brother get crap. "I'm... I was looking for Knox."

Todd looked petrified to say the least. He was just in the middle of unpacking his bag in solidarity when a boy he barely knew barged in

with a *cream tube* in his hands, then promptly hid that cream tube and asked to see his roommate. Neil realized soon that hiding the cream seemed a lot more suspicious than just holding it. But it wasn't like he could rush to explain what it was either because then that would make it seem like he was eager to make Todd think it wasn't something weird because it *was,* in fact, something weird. It was okay, though, because Todd dropped the pair of pants he was holding and almost fell over trying to pick it back up.

Neil smiled at the thought that at least they were *both* disasters.

"Uh—unpacking already?" Neil asked, actually wanting to hit himself in the fact after that one. Unpacking *already*? When are you supposed to unpack *Neil*? A month after? He pursed his lips and wanted to just walk out the door right then. "I mean... that's efficient. Good job."

Todd smiled the tiniest bit. "Thanks?"

"So... no more Balincrest?"

Todd lost his smile and turned back to his suitcase, successfully picking up that pair of pants and putting them where they belonged. "Yeah."

"Well, I think Welton is a good place for you," Neil said, finally being able to say out loud all the things he'd been practicing in his head while Jeffery made him very anti-Anderson family. "If you ever need anything, my room's just down the hall. Don't go there when Charlie's alone, he'll probably... I don't know what he'll do just don't find yourself in a situation alone with him."

"Okay," Todd said, and Neil thought that was going to be the end of it, but Todd kept talking. "Would you—uh—I mean if you have time, could you show me around? If you want, you don't hafta'—"

"No!" Neil yelled and interrupted, and then realized how that sounded. "I mean... not *no*! But like no, I want to. I mean I can. No, I mean I want to. Do you have time right now? I can just—" He stopped and looked down to the cream in his hands, and then chucked it on the bed on the other side of the room. "Knox can find that later."

Todd let out an actual laugh and Neil felt his worries fade away. "Why are you being so nice to me?"

Neil furrowed his eyebrows. "What do you mean? Why wouldn't I?"

"Cause' Jeffery said you were in debate with him n' stuff." Todd scratched the back of his neck. "I thought maybe he would tell you stuff and you wouldn't like me."

"You were worried I wouldn't like you?" Neil asked, part in shock because how could Todd *ever* think that and part in shock that Todd cared enough about how Neil thought of him to worry about it. "Of course I like you. It's Jeffery I don't like. I mean, he can be a total dick." Neil let the words spill out of his mouth before he even thought about how Todd would interpret them, but he felt alright about it when he looked up and saw Todd was still smiling.

"He can be," Todd agreed, "Specially' when he's stressed, but doesn't matter. You gonna show me around or not?"

"I will show you everything," Neil said and then bowed with a hand over his heart. "I solemnly swear."

Todd laughed again and Neil had never felt so happy.

Fifth—Better Showers

Chapter Summary

> Neil, the showering master, wants to show Todd a cool trick for getting better showers.

Chapter Notes

> This story might just remain with no real plot except a slowburn between Todd and Neil and also just more friendship moments between the boys because I'm liking it like that so far.

"You know when you said *sneaking out,* I expected something way more dramatic."

Neil was leading Todd to the older boys' hallway in the middle of the night. He'd been so sneaky he hadn't even woken Charlie up when he'd been leaving. He had bragged about it to Todd, planning not to mention the fact that Charlie was snoring his *terrifying* snores which meant getting stabbed in the chest wouldn't even wake him up. Still, he'd gotten Todd out of *his* room without awakening Knox, and he wasn't sure how light a sleeper Knox was, but he was still going to count it as an ultimate win for himself. Hard to keep either of those two out of your business when you planned on doing something risky.

"Well, we can't be too dramatic," Neil said and turned a corner. Luckily, the chupacabra was fond of hallways leading to outside doors and classrooms, so Neil had nothing to worry about going from one residential hallway to another. "Too dramatic and we'd give all the faculty heart attacks."

"Startin' to think that might be a good thing..." Todd muttered, prompting Neil to turn around and make sure Todd wasn't staring at the ground. He was speaking in that tone of voice that just *signaled* to Neil that his neck was going to be craned toward the ground. Neil was right the first time he'd met Todd, that *was* the only way his neck could bend. He looked at the floor more than he looked Neil in the eyes. He grabbed Todd's cheeks and pulled his face up, pulling an annoyed smile from Todd. Usually, his staring at the ground didn't really hurt anyone, but lately he'd been doing it more and more and almost running into more and more walls. Neil wasn't going to take his chances while the two were on the stairs. "Stop it."

"I'd be fine with giving them heart attacks," Neil said, turning back around to continue leading the way. "But I will *not* be fine with going to prison for manslaughter if you trip down these stairs and die. I'll be blamed! Do you want me to go to jail?"

Todd rubbed his right eye with his knuckle, calling Neil stupid under his breath. He'd been on the brink of falling asleep when Neil had crept in and reminded him of the adventure they were supposed to go on that night. Neil hadn't even given Todd the chance to change out of his embarrassing pajamas, but Neil hadn't done so either, so at least they both looked like idiots. Todd was wearing Christmas pants covered in Christmas trees with eyes and Neil was sporting Easter Bunny pants. Not the proudest pairs of pants either of them owned, but when something was comfortable, it was worth wearing at Welton. "So, so, stupid," Todd continued to mutter.

"You're not gonna think I'm stupid in a second," Neil said and then took that back immediately, "Actually, you might, so I'm not gonna commit too hard to that."

"I don' like being your friend," Todd said in a sleepy tone that reminded Neil of a five-year-old. "Makes me lose sleep."

"You're so—" Neil cut himself off and what he was about to say remained unknown to both of them. He hoped Todd assumed it was a tired stumble of words and wouldn't think anything of it, but Neil knew that if he had kept going, something really weird was going to come out of his mouth. "Annoying. You're so annoying when you're tired."

"*God,* you're so annoying always."

"I'm showing you tips and tricks for how to survive Welton!" Neil tried to bargain. "I promised I would! So I'm doing it. Can't break my promises just cause you're a loser who wants to sleep."

"Int' your first bate' practice morrow'?" Todd's sentences were getting less and less enunciated, and it actually made Neil ecstatic. It meant his surprise was not only going to be refreshing but *funny* with how quickly it was going to wake Todd up. "Ont' you need sleep too?"

"I'd rather look dashing."

"An' how you doin' that?"

"I present to you, Mr. Anderson..." Neil pulled him around a corner,

placing them both right at the entrance of the high school showers. Older boys smelt worse and did a lot worse things, so the showers—well, they still sucked—*but* they were a slightly better upgrade from the ones they had downstairs. Firstly, the shower heads were much higher on the wall. The Welton staff had underestimated how tall middle school boys could get and most of the time Neil had to duck his head when he wanted to wash his hair. The only good part about it was now that Charlie was taller than him, he could join in with his other friends laughing at him. He used to be the laughing stock. "Better showers."

Todd looked unimpressed and Neil pushed his shoulder inside. Okay, so maybe it was weird to lead your friend to a shower in the middle night. It was either promiscuous or insulting, but Neil thought this was a crucial bonding moment. He'd discovered the amazing secret of sneaking up to the older boys showers on his lonesome last year and he hadn't shared it with anyone else. Eventually, he'd be sharing those showers with his disgusting friends, but for right then, he could have them all to himself. There was something about a satisfying shower that just made Neil feel better. He kind of acted like every shower he took was a Baptism and he came out a changed man each time.

"Come on!" Neil whined, "The water is hotter, the pressure is better... it's a man's dream!"

"Ow' much do you hink' I like tuh showa'?"

"A reasonable amount," Neil answered and Todd, no matter how tired he was, still couldn't manage to get an annoyed look on his face. Even when Neil was doing something wrong, he always had this kind of fond smile on his face. It made Neil's heart feel warmer. He grabbed Todd's shoulders and shook him. "Wake up! You're about to take the best shower of your life."

"I ave' a pretty gud' showa' at ome'."

Neil took advantage of Todd's sleepy state and pushed him right under one of the shower heads. He felt no remorse soaking Todd in his white shirt and creepy Christmas tree pajamas. Even less so when Todd let out a shriek at how cold the water was. He reached to turn it off immediately and for a little while Neil won a mini tug of war fight where he kept the faucet on while Todd tried desperately to turn it off. Eventually Todd got it off, but it didn't change the fact that they were both soaked. Neil had the absolute stupidest smile on his face and he could imagine Todd's regret at the one time he'd told Neil he

seemed 'the better one' out of him and Charlie.

"You're so—" Todd was fully awake now, but still couldn't appropriately demonstrate his anger. He wanted to talk some reason into Neil and tell him how ridiculous he was acting and ask him what his plan was for getting out of there without leaving evidence of their break-in, but Neil kept him from doing so by ruffling his soppy hair and running away, challenging Todd to try and do the same to him. And of course, Todd couldn't turn down such a challenge. "I'm still mad at you."

"Oh yeah? I bet," Neil said, jumping one of the benches on the open floor, completely underestimating how athletic Todd could be when he was angry. He saw a fraction of actual worry on Todd's face and decided to reassure him in a way that wouldn't let Todd know his resistance was crumbling. Neil knew Todd didn't like showering with everyone else. Half the time he didn't even think he saw Todd actually get in the shower. He was always sitting on the one windowsill, staring off into the distance while all the other boys dried off after gym class. Another reason why Neil wanted to let him in on his little shower secret. "S'just us, Todd. M' not gonna take pictures and show em' to everybody."

Todd stopped as if that had just amplified a smaller worry in his head. He looked down at himself and cowered, and Neil felt like he had done something extremely wrong while he was trying to do something right.

"Todd?" He asked hesitantly.

"Sorry..." The other boy responded and sat down on the bench, hugging his knees close to himself and making sure that he was as small as possible. Little of him being seen except the mop of hair on his head and his soaked pajama pants.

"Sorry for what?" Neil sat down and put a hand on Todd's knee, forgetting temporarily what a disgusting, wet sound that was going to make. "We're just having fun."

"Yeah, but Charlie probably wouldn't sit down on a bench and sulk," Todd said out of nowhere, "You should be—"

Neil gave him absolutely no chance to finish that thought. "Well, I don't wanna share this with Charlie. If I wanted tuh, he'd be here. *You're* the one here, aren't ya'?"

"Yeah, but I—"

"Ah, ah, ah," Neil tutted and put his wet finger to Todd's lips. "No buts. You're fine. I don' know what you're so worried about."

"It's just, you know...' Todd lifted up his arm where his shirt sleeve was clinging to his shoulder. Usually it barely fit his shoulder right. "Wet clothes cling to you. Makes stuff obvious."

"*Oh*," Neil said, finally piecing together why Todd didn't like showering with the other boys. It wasn't just cause he liked his privacy. He was self-conscious about what he looked like. Not that a bunch of fifth graders all had *stunning* bodies, but Neil knew the danger of comparing yourself to others. It made you feel like garbage even if you weren't. "You don't gotta worry about that, Todd."

Todd looked up and made eye contact with Neil right over his knees. "I don't?"

"Not that I care what you look like, stupid," Neil said and then tugged Todd off the bench, leaving plenty of wet puddles behind in their wake. "But you're—" Neil, as a ten-year-old, had a limited amount of words he could continue that sentence with. There were some obvious ones that would just sound too weird. Like cute, but calling Todd *cute* while they were alone in the showers probably wasn't going to be a good move. Then there were some words from Charlie's vulgar magazine descriptions that he continually insisted on reading out loud to torment Neil, but then again Neil wasn't necessarily sure how the word *sexy* was supposed to be applied. However, he was sure Todd wouldn't like hearing it from his mouth when, once again, they were alone in the showers. But he wasn't so happy with what he ended up saying anyway. "You're fine."

Thankfully, it made Todd laugh. "Thanks, you're fine too." Neil was about to make some snarky comment about how he was so much more than fine, but not only would that make him sound too much like Charlie, he was stopped by the sound of footsteps in the hallway. Todd heard them too and they both looked at each other with an equal amount of fear. Neil grabbed him and pulled them both to the furthest bathroom stall where they stood on either side of the toilet seat and leaned against the walls while a flashlight shone over the main entrance to the bathroom. Neil managed to keep control of his heavy breathing, but that didn't make anything better. He looked up at Todd for reassurance, but was only met with the words 'I'm gonna kill you' being mouthed at him from across a toilet.

Even though his life hung in the balance, he mouthed back, 'That would ruin the fun!'

After a few terrified moments of silence, Neil deemed it clear to at least start breathing again. Another few moments later and Todd decided he liked oxygen too and they were both breathing heavily to try and recover from their near-death experience.

"*Jesus,* Neil," Todd said, "I know I said I hate it here, but I'm not trying to get expelled."

"Oh, I know," Neil responded, "If you wanted to get expelled, I'd come up with a much better plan."

"Stupid," Todd said again and then flashed a smirk for a second. He kicked Neil's ankle and Neil lost his balance, landing both feet in the toilet while trying not to crash to his death. Todd jumped off his side of the seat and walked away while Neil pulled his toilet-water soaked socks from the bowl. "Bet you wanna shower now, huh?"

"I actually wanted to shower before." Neil sat down on the ground and began peeling off his socks, rolling them up into a sopping ball and chucking them in Todd's direction. Todd dodged it rather gracefully. "Now I want to kill you."

"You won't," Todd said.

"I will." Neil stood up.

"Doubt it." Todd backed up.

"Start believing." Neil charged toward him and the rest of their adventure was spent in wet clothes wrestling each other until one of them admitted *something*. Halfway into the fight they didn't even really know what they were tussling about for. But it ended with Todd submitting when Neil had his elbow bent behind his back and Todd's own bangs in his eyes as a blindfold so he couldn't accurately fight back. "Now you gotta' put our clothes in the laundry."

"Fat chance!" Todd thrashed under Neil. "You already won! Can you get offa' me?"

"Not until you say you're gonna take our clothes to the laundry."

"Neil, that would require getting naked in the hallway, running to the bathroom naked, and then running back to my room naked," Todd

said.

"Do I look like I care?" Neil asked, "I don' wanna get my room wet *at all* or Charlie'll know I went somewhere. This is our secret, Todd, we gotta keep it."

"If you wanna keep it so bad, *you* can run naked through the halls."

"I won the fight!"

"Did you?" Todd lifted Neil off of him with a surge of strength and flailed aimlessly until they were in the same position as before, but this time with Todd on top.

"I admire it, Anderson," Neil said with his face pushed into the gross bathroom floor. "Should we at least actually shower before we go? I am covered in toilet and *Todd* water."

"Fine." Todd hopped up and stuck out his hand to help Neil up too. "But only because you already got me wet and covered me in *Neil* water. Not because I believe any of that crap you said about these showers being better."

"I'll take what I can get, Toddsie." Neil smiled and turned around, walking to his designated shower head. To his surprise, Todd chose to use one relatively close to his. Still very *very* far, but closer than Neil thought he was going to be. "I'll take what I can get."

Fifth—You, Me, And Smooth Jazz

Chapter Summary

Neil argues with Todd about his impending plan to get into some trouble with Charlie. Cameron expresses some concerns.

Chapter Notes

CW// Internalized homophobia, homophobic language, homophobic themes
because everyone in the 50s except for Charlie Dalton sucked

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"No, you're not."

"Yes, I am."

"No, you're not."

"Yes, I am!" Neil jumped backward and landed both of his feet straight on top of Knox's bed. He was out for the night, having to attend some fancy dinner with his parents, so Neil would make sure to wipe off his dirty footprints off the blankets before he got back, but he had bigger issues to deal with at the moment. He pointed at Todd and yelled like he was rallying him for some sort of revolution. "Come on, Anderson! Do you know your captain to ever *not* do something once his mind is set?"

Neil was sure with every one of his eye rolls Todd was wondering how exactly a quiet kid like him had warmed up so quickly to somebody like Neil. Somebody who just *wouldn't shut up.* "I very well know how much *trouble* the captain gets into, which is why I'm saying—"

"*Your* captain," Neil corrected.

"Well, whatever," Todd dismissed.

"Someone wants to walk the plank."

"My god, Neil, will you stop being so ridiculous!?" Todd pulled Neil off of his roommate's bed harshly and stared him in the eyes. "A *radio* is not worth you getting expelled. Do you know what your dad is gonna do to you?"

Neil shoved Todd off of him at those words and turned around to dramatically stare out the window. Out of everyone, Todd was the only one, besides Neil himself, who constantly reminded him that he needed to behave so he wouldn't get punished. Not that he didn't appreciate it, but most of the time his ten year old brain viewed it as a major downer. As Todd not ever allowing him to be happy. Neil didn't care about the radio, really. It was more the fact that he was responsible for the fact it had broken. Meeks and Pitts had finally gotten a signal on their little project. That signal must've been *The Clovers* personal radio station or something because the only song that ever played was *Love Potion No. 9.* After a lot of experimenting with knob turning and wire connecting, Meeks and Pitts had figured out that it was Love Potion No. 9 or nothing with their radio, so they took each win as it came.

Neil was real happy for them. The entire previous year they had made it nowhere with that dumb little thing, but after sneaking in more necessary supplies into school after the summer, they'd succeeded. Succeeded in wanting to start a hate club for The Clovers, sure, but they succeeded in something. Charlie had sweet talked Meeks into letting him and Neil borrow it for a night, and long story short, they liked Love Potion No. 9 a hell of a lot more than Meeks and Pitts did. Too much, actually. Anyway, it ended with the one part that had actually made the radio work being broken, so Charlie and Neil did the natural thing—hide cigarettes and weed for the older boys in exchange for favors—and they planned on fixing the radio without Meeks or Pitts ever knowing. They very well knew, and they were still mad at them.

That's when the older boys from their previous arrangement told Neil that if they got him something, he would find another part for the radio that might even get *more* songs than just Love Potion No. 9, so Neil jumped at this opportunity without even knowing what it was the boy wanted. That'd make Meeks and Pitts look at him and Charlie again. What Todd was so freaked out about, though, was the fact that the thing he needed to get was in Nolan's office. Even worse, it was Nolan's extra set of keys. The older boys didn't want all the keys, just the ones to the dining hall. Neil was honestly too concerned to ask what the hell they were planning on doing in the dining hall, but it didn't matter to him.

He had planned on doing it alone, but of course when Charlie Dalton heard about a scheme it was hard to keep him out of it. Neil hoped Todd would be a third accomplice or an alibi, but what he got was a second mother. "It won't be that hard."

"You're not gonna do it."

"Yes I am."

"You're not!"

Neil's lips curled up into a smile and he started laughing. He wasn't exactly sure why. Maybe it was because Todd was doing more than his actual mother ever did and he found it funny or maybe it was cause Todd's voice got real squeaky when he was mad, but whatever it was, Neil was cackling.

"What are you laughing at?"

"You..." Neil said through laughter and turned back around, seeing a mortified expression on Todd's face. "Not like that, but... I'm doing it."

"No you're not!" Neil kept laughing and walked toward Todd, waving his hands in his face and making a little *nyah* sound through his giggles. He was so giddy, he wanted Todd to feel it too. It kind of worked. He got the tiniest smile from Todd, the fond one that he got whenever he was being an idiot, but Todd dropped it real quick and pushed Neil away from him. "Seriously, Neil. I'm serious."

"Seriously, you're serious?"

"Shut up."

"Super, super, serious?"

"Shut up!" Todd punched Neil in the shoulder, but Neil never stopped smiling.

"Okay, okay, calm down, handsy," He said and led them both to Todd's bed where they sat down. He looked over at Knox's empty bed and an idea blossomed in his mind. "How bout' when Meeks and Pitts fix the radio and get more songs playin', you and Charlie switch rooms for a night."

"Huh?" Todd asked.

"Well, Charlie likes botherin' Knox and we could get the radio and listen to it. Don't hide that you are inclined to music, Anderson. Every real man is."

Todd shook his head. "And you really think Meeks is gonna *give* you the radio? Fat chance."

"Hey, if you were there with me, probably."

"Why's that?"

"Cause you're a lot more gentle than Charlie," Neil explained, "Only thing you ever hurt is me."

"You deserve it."

"Maybe I do." Neil stood back up. "But doesn't that sound like a rockin' night? You, me, and smooth jazz? Don't you miss the sound of morning radio? Maybe we could listen to the Chordettes. A little Mr. Sandman?" He poked Todd. "Add a little Frank Sinatra." He poked Todd again and gasped in excitement as he got more suggestions in his mind. "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy? Jailhouse Rock? Hound Dog?" He was poking Todd a lot more viciously than before, borderline tickling him. Then he pulled back and did his biggest gasp yet. "Maybe we'll hear some Bye Bye Birdie!"

Todd paused in between his laughter to ask, "What's Bye Bye Birdie?"

"*You don't know Bye Bye Birdie*?" Neil sat down next to him urgently. "You... haven't heard about Hugo and Kim?" Neil sounded over-dramatic and way more devastated than he should've been.

"No, stupid," Todd said, "What is it?"

"A great musical!" Neil yelled, "Don't get me wrong, I'm much more a fan of traditional plays, but this one's too catchy. Like—" He pulled Todd up and twirled him around the room. "We love you Conrad! Oh yes we do! We love you Conrad! And we'll be—"

Todd put a hand over his mouth and silenced him, though he couldn't pretend he wasn't happy to see Neil so excited about something. "Quiet down, Don Lockwood." Neil's face dropped and Todd was worried he'd done something wrong so he furrowed his eyebrows. "What?"

"You know Singing in the Rain and *not* Bye Bye Birdie?"

Todd shoved him out the door. "You're so annoying."

"... You're letting me go?"

"Yeah, and I expect that radio," Todd responded, "And I expect to know the plot of Bye Bye Birdie by the end of next week."

"Oh, you can count on it, Toddsie! I promise!" Neil ran back in and shook Todd as he often did when he was really happy with him. This time, he was happier than he'd ever been before, and he pressed an excited little kiss to the tip of Todd's nose, not entirely realizing what he had done until he was halfway skipped down the hallway back to his dorm. He paused for an only moment and then continued. He was filled with adrenaline when he'd done it. It's not like he made out with Todd or anything. Neil was fine. Neil was—Neil liked *girls.* To whoever cared, Neil liked girls. If Jeffery Anderson ever asked, Neil would tell him that his brother was *way* better than him, but in a completely platonic way. He pushed all these thoughts away from his mind, however, when he walked into his dorm and saw Charlie standing with a piece of paper taped to the wall and a ruler in hand. "Oh boy."

"Listen up, cadet," Charlie said, "Here's what's gonna happen."

—

Two days detention for being out of their room past lights out wasn't that bad considering what they had actually done had been far worse. Neil still never knew what the older boys planned to do in the dining hall, but he delivered the new part to Meeks and Pitts and they were happy, so that's all he really cared about. The teacher who had caught them even said he wasn't going to call their parents, and Neil couldn't believe his luck they'd run into the only teacher in the entire school that wouldn't immediately go running to his father about what he'd done. So in all, it was a win-win. And he wasn't in detention alone. Charlie was there.

But, man, was Charlie annoying in detention.

He folded a paper airplane and tossed it in Neil's direction. It flew no where near Neil and stopped right in between the two boys and fell to the ground with a crinkle. This got the attention of the detention teacher and he looked up to Charlie. "Mr. Dalton, how long do you want to be in here?"

"Five minutes?" Charlie said back, "Even less, probably."

"Then behave or you're never leaving."

"Technically I don't think you can—"

"Quiet, Mr. Dalton."

In front of them, Neil heard a snicker. Richard Cameron was sitting at one of the front desks doing work. Somehow he had talked his way into sitting in a classroom away from all of the other boys to do his work so they wouldn't distract him. He was really dedicated to his studies for a ten year old and Neil worried about him sometimes. It hadn't bothered him when he just knew about it, but now that he was in there watching Cameron sweat over his math textbook, he couldn't help but feel bad. When they were finally released, Charlie didn't wait at all before rushing out of the room, but Neil walked up to Cameron.

"Hey, I thought I told you not to worry so much."

"About what?" Cameron asked without looking up.

"About school." Neil sat down in the desk next to him. "Have a little fun. Take a break."

"I can't afford a break, Neil," Cameron snapped, "And you'd be right here with me if you weren't so focused on impressing that stiff."

Neil blinked. "Huh?"

"Todd," Cameron clarified, "You're all over him. It's weird, Neil."

"Again... huh?"

"If I didn't know you I would think that you were a pansy." Cameron still hadn't looked at him. "Does that not weird you out? No doubts about that stiff—"

"Shut up," Neil interrupted him, warning Cameron with only his tone that he probably shouldn't try to speak again.

"See, that." Cameron looked up and pointed his pencil eraser at Neil. "You're defending him too much. Don't let him get his girliness on you."

Neil gritted his teeth and any happiness he'd ever felt drained out of his body. "Shut. Up."

"I'm just saying, everyone knows. Thas' probably why his family doesn't like him—"

Neil rushed forward and grabbed the collar of Cameron's shirt, pulling him up out of his chair and inching their faces real close. "Don't chat shit about things you know nothing about, Cameron."

Cameron, even though he was literally levitating off the ground, had the audacity to roll his eyes. "*Everyone* knows Neil. Everyone knows that Jeffery's the Anderson's golden boy, that Todd's a fairy—"

"Cut it out," Neil interrupted rather calmly, and the seething anger in his tone was what made Cameron realize he might've been in actual danger right then. Really, Neil knew Cameron was terrified of him, which was why he was so surprised that he had decided to keep running his mouth. He stared Cameron down and then dropped him back on the ground, grabbing his things and rushing out of his room. Neil wasn't going to stand for anyone talking about Todd like that, especially when they compared him to Jeffery, but he couldn't help but think that Cameron might've been right about *him*. All over Todd? He didn't think he was. He swallowed in thought as he sped-walked past the boy's room, but his arm was caught.

"Hey, how was detention?" Todd was smiling so big Neil felt horrible for what he was about to do. "I told you *something* bad was gonna happen."

"Yeah," Neil said shortly and shook Todd's hand off of him.

"So, you ask Meeks for the radio?"

"No," Neil said, "I don't think it's a good idea anymore."

Todd furrowed his eyebrows. "What? But you—"

"I know," Neil said quickly before Todd could continue. "But it's just not a good idea anymore, alright?" He tried walking away again but Todd was persistent.

"But you promised."

Neil tightened his face to keep himself from looking sad.

"Sorry."

Then he walked away.

Chapter End Notes

> to anyone who has left a comment you are all very nice and i love and thank you. i get so nervous each time i see a comment notification, but its always positive. so thank you so much :)

Fifth—Who Cares What Cameron Thinks?

Chapter Summary

> Neil realizes he's being kind of dumb and get's owned by both Todd and Charlie.

Chapter Notes

> CW// !!HOMOPHOBIC SLUR!! Homophobic language, homophobic themes, internalized homophobia

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil didn't like it, but he had been avoiding Todd. He tried to make it seem like he wasn't, but that was hard when he went from spending every extra second with Todd to not spending any time with him at all. It was so bad all of their friends noticed, but Neil had told them nothing was going on. Everyone left him alone except for Charlie. It would be a miracle if Charlie ever left Neil alone about anything, but he was especially not letting up about this. Neil almost had to resort to avoiding him too, which was much harder when they slept in the same room. The amount of times Charlie had woken him up in the middle of the night in an attempt to get him to tiredly express his emotions had exceeded the amount that Neil could count on both of his hands.

It hurt him, but he figured it was best for Todd if he kept leaving him alone. He had to be the reason everyone thought all that bad stuff about Todd because who could think bad stuff about Todd otherwise? Maybe Cameron was right, Neil was all over Todd all the time and it had led everyone to thinking that *Todd* was the weirdo instead of Neil because Neil was popular and all Todd was to most people was Jeffery Anderson's little brother. To keep it up, he had to not even think about Todd or look at him. The second he saw the betrayed puppy-dog look on Todd's face or thought about what he imagined Neil could be mad at him for, Neil was very close to dropping it all.

But like most fights between young children, it didn't last too long. Neil finally came to his senses during debate practice. Somehow, he had become the vice president and Jeffery was the new president. He hated debate, but apparently the president and vice president didn't actually do much except boss everyone else around. So basically all Neil did was nod his head when Jeffery was being a dick to the other

boys and get handed a stop watch. The only thing that sucked about it was he had to stay with Jeffery after practice and sort of *rate* the other boys, organize files, typical president stuff...

It was only an extra thirty minutes or so, but it was Neil's least favorite thirty minutes of the day.

"So did you look over Myers' list of proposed debate topics?" Jeffery asked Neil, who definitely wasn't paying attention to whatever he had to say. He was way more focused on staring outside the window. He couldn't help but notice that Todd had taken residence under a large tree right outside the debate classroom window. Todd liked reading, so he usually grabbed a book, sat under that tree, and gave Neil something nice to look at during debate practice. Nice in the way that it was better than anything in the classroom, of course. Not that he was... *nice* to look at. Though, he was, but in a platonic way. Neil thought all his friends were attractive. He was surrounded by attractive people. When Neil got super bored, him and Todd would mouth words to each other and have a conversation, but lately all his boredom got him was devastation. Suddenly, someone was snapping in his face. "Perry? Are you with me?"

"Not entirely."

"Well, I knew that."

"Why'd you ask then?" Neil snapped.

"What is up with you?" Jeffery shoved a paper toward him and Neil saw that it was the list of proposed debate topics. Somehow, he'd been given the job of prioritizing debate topics. Every week, a new member would give him a new list. Bryan Myers' week was Neil's least favorite. That guy sucked and had a worse mind than Charlie.

"How do you mean?" Neil asked in an attempt to pretend to be oblivious, taking the paper from Jeffery's hands and gagging when he saw the very first suggestion. "Can we just kick him out?"

"I'd love to, but he has an extensive vocabulary," Jeffery said, also casting a disgusted look down at the paper. Don't get him wrong, Neil still had a very strong dislike for Jeffery, but out of everyone he had to spend his time around, Jeffery was one of the better ones. When he forgot that him and Todd were related, he could actually get along with him occasionally.

"Just assign everyone a dictionary to memorize," Neil folded the paper

and set it aside to traumatize him for later. "Everyone will be using words like *preposterous* and *egregious* soon enough."

"Maybe I will." Jeffery shrugged. "So what *is* up with you?"

"Seriously, how do you mean?"

"Do you think my brother doesn't talk to me at all?" Jeffery suddenly asked and sat on top of the desk across from the one Neil was sitting on.

"Yeah."

"Well, okay," Jeffery sighed, "He does. Not a lot, but you know, he's gotta pretend he cares what I'm up to when mom and dad ask him how school's going." Neil felt the usual rage heating up in his stomach. The fact that Jeffery could say things like that—things that literally spelt out how much their parents didn't give a crap what Todd did—and still pretend like him and Todd were equal in their family... it made Neil angry. "And I ask him stuff too."

"And your parents ask about that too?" Neil couldn't stop the words from coming out.

"Okay, what my parents talk about isn't the point, Perry," Jeffery dismissed as he always did when he was about to proven wrong. If there was one thing Jeffery Anderson hated, it was being wrong, and on top of that *proven* wrong. "He doesn't have a lot going on yet, so he talks about his friends. Why're you so mad at him?"

"Mad at him?" Neil asked and looked over his shoulder to the window, seeing Todd with the same book he'd been reading for the last week. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer.* He'd said it was hard to go through because Tom Sawyer annoyed him. "I'm not—why would I be mad at him?"

"You tell me, Neil," Jeffery responded, "He can't think of a reason either, and it's really upsettin' him, so will you sort it out?"

Will you sort out how badly everyone is talking about him? Neil angrily thought, *What right do you have to know what makes Todd upset?* And that's when Neil realized, Todd had to be real hurt to tell *Jeffery* how he was feeling. It meant that he felt like he couldn't talk to any of their friends: not Pitts, not Meeks, not Knox, and definitely not Charlie. He couldn't talk to them about his issues if they were about *Neil.* Because for the most part, they were still Neil's friends, not his.

And that's when Neil decided to choose the lesser of two evils. Spend time with Todd instead of continue to avoid him. He didn't realize that he'd been staring in silence for at least a minute until Jeffery was snapping in his face again—he really liked snapping in Neil's face.

"Yeah... yeah," Neil said quietly and gathered up his stuff. "I'll fix it." He walked to the door and then turned around and pointed at the debate president. "Not cause you told me tuh'."

"Whatever you want to think..." Jeffery said and went back to organizing papers.

Neil dropped all of his stuff off at his dorm, briefly interrupting some weird game Charlie and Knox were playing, and he suddenly had an extra reason to be glad he was about to reconcile with Todd. Not that the initial reasons weren't enough, but during the time before dinner which he usually spent with Todd, Knox and Charlie were always in his room doing something. Sometimes they were breaking the rules, all the time they were doing something weird. Of course, Neil did not know this when he first cut off his pre-dinner arrangements, but if he had maybe it would've made him think twice about his idiocy. Safe to say he was happy in his decision when he walked in and saw both Charlie and Knox with shirts tied around their heads.

"You can ask," Charlie had said.

"Do you want to answer?" Neil had responded.

"Not really. Do you want to know?"

"Not really."

"Resume your regular duties."

It had inspired him to walk twice as fast to the tree where he knew Todd was. Before he was even all the way there, Todd had noticed he was approaching, and Neil didn't look away from the look of betrayal, so what he'd done hit him twice as hard. Neither of them said anything when Neil finally got to the trunk of the tree and sat down. The view was uglier than literally any other tree and Neil felt even worse. Todd stared at this ugly, dilapidated brick wall in front of him to be near Neil during debate practice and Neil had the audacity to make him think he'd done something. Neil looked down into his lap and awkwardly played with his fingers.

"What do *you* think Charlie and Knox do when they're alone?" He

suddenly asked into the empty air. He wasn't looking at Todd, and he was sure Todd wasn't looking at him, but he heard a little laugh. That little laugh he always got from Todd and he smiled.

"I dunno," Todd quietly responded, "Make lasso's out of your blankets? Whack each other with their belts?"

"Both very good guesses."

"Maybe Knox teaches Charlie how to tie a tie."

Neil sighed out. "Oh, Mr. Nolan wishes."

"So whadda' they do?"

"I'm not exactly sure," Neil said, "But I dropped off my stuff and they were both wearing homemade bandanas and in the process of putting on war paint."

"I'm sorry you had to see that," Todd laughed, "I'm sorry you have to live with that. Knox is much better away from Charlie."

"Isn't everyone?"

"Yeah, everyone's also a lot more *boring* without Charlie," Todd said, "Not you."

"Not me?"

"Yeah, cause you're nearly as bad as him."

Neil whipped around the tree and smacked Todd on the shoulder. "Hey!"

"What? You don't deserve a little insult?" Suddenly the smile on Todd's face dropped and he refused to look at Neil. "You ignored me for two weeks and now you're pretending you didn't. What did I do?"

"You didn't do anything..." Neil leant his head back against the tree trunk. He wanted to be honest, but he didn't want to be honest at the cost of Todd's feelings. "It was me. Cameron said—" Neil cut himself off and took a breath. He really had no idea how to approach telling Todd this.

"Cameron?" Todd asked with underlying disgust, "Since when do you care about anything he says?"

"Do you feel like I'm all over you?"

"Huh?" Todd furrowed his eyebrows. "What the heck does that mean?"

"You know..." Neil scooted closer so they could stop having an important conversation while both staring at the ugliest brick walls in the universe. Welton was, if nothing, a huge mood killer. "Am I too touchy? Do I make you uncomfortable?"

"Is *that* what Cameron told you?!"

"Not exactly." Neil brought his knees up to his chest. "Cameron said a lot crap, and I *don't* care about anything he says. It just made me think. You know, that I'm a bit... *extra*. A little too extra for, you know..."

"Neil, are you saying Cameron made you feel a little too gay to be friends with me?"

"Well, I'm not—" Neil interrupted himself out of the pure shock that Todd had suddenly turned that direct, and not just that, but that he seemed *mad* about it. He didn't expect Todd to thank him or anything, but he did expect a general distasteful reaction when he brought it up, not like this. He wanted Todd to call Neil everything Cameron had called him and save himself on his own accord. "Kind of?"

"Well, are you?"

"Huh?"

"Gay? A little too gay?"

"I—I don't think so?"

"Then what's it matter?" Todd said, "You're not a fag, so what do you actually care!?"

"I don't!" Neil yelled, "I don't care *what* Cameron thinks *I* am, but he said that you—" Neil really had to stop cutting himself off. Maybe he wouldn't have to if he actually thought before he spoke, but he usually didn't have to when he was talking to Todd. Todd's hurt stare was delving deep into Neil's soul, so he didn't even need to be prompted to keep going. "He said that people think you're a fairy, and I can't imagine why anyone would be sayin' that stuff about you, so I thought I musta' been the problem. I thought you'd be better off without me making you seem all..." Neil absently waved his hand in the air, not

daring to look at Todd.

"Well, I'm not gonna thank you, that's for sure," Todd let out a dry laugh and Neil could hear the echo of tears.

Neil's tone sounded exactly like Todd's as he said, "Good. Don't. And for the record, I wouldn't care."

"What?"

"If you were... I wouldn't care."

Todd turned his head quickly to Neil. "Do you think I am?"

"I don't think anything about you except that you're my friend," Neil responded, and that seemed to calm Todd down immediately. "But for the record, I'm not a snobby bigot like Cameron is sometimes. None of us are. Knox, Charlie, and all them I mean. And, you know, if you're ever hurtin' and you can't talk to me... you can talk to them."

"I've talked to Charlie."

"Well, maybe not him."

Todd laughed. "I dunno' what he was saying anyway."

"So, are we good? Can I ask how your book's going?"

"We've always been good." Todd smiled and then looked down at the book in his hands. "And it's not going at all. He's *so* annoying, Neil. I never wanna read again."

"Here, give it to me." Neil took the book from Todd's hands and looked down. He hadn't got that much further in it since the last time Neil had seen him reading it, so Neil knew this vendetta against Tom Sawyer must've been serious. "I'll read it to you."

"Really?"

"Yes, I'm not letting Todd Anderson go with a book unfinished!" Neil said and then scooted until he was sitting in front of Todd. "I'll try to make him as less annoying as I can, promise."

"Okay, Mark Twain," Todd agreed, "Let's do it."

—

"You talk to Toddsie?"

Charlie's voice echoed in their dark dorm room and Neil groaned and turned over. Charlie had a talent for talking right as Neil was about to fall asleep. He switched on the desk light and laughed as Charlie reeled back like a vampire from the bright light. Usually, Neil either ignored him or they just talked in the dark, so safe to say Charlie wasn't expecting to get blinded. "Yeah, I did."

"So what was up?" Charlie sat up. "Can I know now? I have like... rights."

"Rights?"

"Rights to know about your issues," Charlie explained, "Usually I'm first, but since this was about Todd I figured *he* should know first..."

"Who said you would be first?"

"Well, I did." Charlie moved on quickly. "So what was up?"

"Just Cameron being a—well, being Cameron."

"Ugh, you let that floozy get in your head?"

"I do not think floozy is the right word for Cameron."

"Nevertheless," Charlie said dramatically and stood up from his bed. "What was it this time? Women should only cook? People with autism shouldn't reproduce? Wow, he has a lot more problems than I thought. Why are we friends with him?"

"Because that stuff is what *everyone* thinks," Neil sighed, "Except us, the normal people. Bound to befriend a few assholes."

"So what was it?"

"He said it's weird how close Todd and I are."

"Oh," Charlie said and then fell back down on his bed. "Afraid of catching the gay, Neil?"

"Sorry?"

"I'm kidding," Charlie said, "Do you like Todd?"

"Of course I like Todd," Neil said quickly and then looked into

Charlie's eyes. "Oh... no, not like—no."

"You don't wanna like... kiss em' and stuff?"

"No, I don't."

"Then who gives a crap what Cameron says," Charlie waved his hand dismissively. "Last I checked he wasn't the friendship police, and what business would it be of his if you and Todd wanted to be all gay together?"

"But it's not—"

"It's not what? Normal?" Charlie asked, "Yes it is. I mean, look at me. I'm as normal as can be and—"

"And what?"

"And nothing. Goodnight, Neil."

"You're so weird, man."

"I'd better be."

Chapter End Notes

> comments! i love all of you! you make me happy! thank you for commenting and im glad you're enjoying! so i feel the need to clarify again i dont know whats gonna happen next in this story as much as you dont. i just click new chapter and start typing, so if things are too fast or too slow... oh well!

Fifth—Stand By Me

Chapter Summary

Todd comes back from a Birthday weekend with his family to Neil realizing how mean he's actually been.

Chapter Notes

oh dilly dally, feel like this is moving a bit fast but then again these two idiots would probably fall in love with each other too quick in any situation

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Frankenstein."

"Dracula."

Charlie shot up from his bed and glared at Neil's side of the room, finding that Neil had done the exact same thing and they were now staring at each other. "You did not just say Dracula."

"You did not just say Frankenstein!" Neil responded, "Firstly, Frankenstein's *monster*—"

"Oh, now you're gonna be that guy."

"What? The smart guy?" Neil said, "Frankenstein is the *doctor*."

"Debatably the real monster."

"But Dracula—"

"Is boring!" Charlie shouted and stood up. "Boring! Right, Knox?" Both the boys turned their heads to the silent Knox, who had just been trying to read the assigned English book when Charlie and Neil had gotten into the fight about which monster was cooler. Neil was team Dracula all the way, but Charlie had some strong opinions. Knox groaned into the pages of his book and slammed his head down on the desk. For English they had three books to choose from: *Dracula, Frankenstein,* or *The Scarlet Letter.* Knox had been super excited to read either of the monster books, but in the end he chose to read the Scarlet Letter just so he couldn't be weaponized.

"I'm not a part of this," Knox finally said and pulled his face out of the book. "Is it not bad enough you've forced me to read *this*? Can you both just let it go?"

"I'll let it go when Neil realizes he's wrong." Charlie crossed his arms and stared pointedly at the boy in question, who met him with a glare.

"I'm never wrong."

"You're always wrong!"

"Really? Compared to *you,* I'm always wrong?"

"What's that supposed to mean!?"

"That you're an idiot!"

"I miss Todd," Knox said quietly and shoved his face back into his book so he at the least he wouldn't have to look at them. Todd and Jeffery were both gone to their house for Todd's birthday over the weekend. Henceforth leaving Knox with no excuse to keep Charlie and Neil off of his back when he actually wanted to do schoolwork. He used Todd for everything. Just one *Todd's tired* or *Todd doesn't like when the room gets too loud* and anyone would back off, even Neil who could probably smile at Todd and get anything he wanted. But without Todd, Knox was stuck with the other boys. He hated to be alone, and when Meeks and Pitts were who-knew-where doing who-knew-what, his only options were either Richard Cameron or the Chaos Brothers. He chose the Chaos Brothers every single time.

"Shut up," Charlie said, "What is that book even about?" He pointed to the Scarlet Letter. Most of the class had opted not to read it because it sounded so boring in comparison to the other two. "Like a letter? In an envelope?"

"Not even close," Knox said.

"Here, read it to me."

"I'll just tell you what it's about—"

"No, read it to me," Charlie interrupted, "I need something besides Neil's *annoying* voice in my head."

"You're so—" Neil stopped himself before he let out an angry rant that would probably end in Charlie's death. His whining had reminded him

that he had to return *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* back to Knox and Todd's room. He was waiting until Todd got back to give it to him, but it was the only thing he could think of at the moment to get out of there. He knew this routine. Charlie would beg Knox for something, Knox would give in, and eventually they would become worse than Neil and Charlie. Most of the time, Neil used debate as an excuse to get out of there, but—get this—debate practice had been *cancelled* that weekend because Jeffery wasn't going to be there. Neil reached under his pillow and grabbed the Mark Twain book, rushing to the door. "I'll be in your room."

"Can you clean up while you're in there?" Knox suddenly asked, "I haven't done laundry since Anderson left and he likes a clean room."

"Then you do it?"

"I have to finish this stupid book," Knox said with an accusatory glare.

"You didn't have to read in here!" Neil shouted and then took a breath, opening the door and repeating that he was going to be in Knox's room. He'd spent every second of every day with those two the previous year, and now he wasn't quite sure how he had done it without strangling them. He loved them, of course he loved them, but he'd of rather jumped out the window than spent another second with them at that moment. Soon enough he was in the other dorm, calming down immediately. That room always smelt really good. Or it smelt normal and Charlie and Neil's room just smelt like wet dog, which Neil didn't doubt was possible. However, it was a mess, and Neil had no idea how Knox could do that 1. By himself and 2. In the few short days Todd had been gone. Neil set *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* on Todd's bedside table next to Todd's stack of books. Neil was happy they'd finally finished that one so he could move on. He was convinced Todd hated Tom Sawyer more than... well, more than someone. He really hated Tom Sawyer.

Neil thought Tom Sawyer was alright. He gave him a cool voice and each time his dialogue came up he'd make it super eccentric so Todd wouldn't lose his mind. He was almost sad when they'd finished, but Todd told him that they could read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* together once he got back, and he sounded super happy about it. Huck Finn was a lot more tolerable than Tom Sawyer. Neil didn't realize that he'd sat down on Todd's bed and had his finger trailing down the spine of all of Todd's books. He had quite the collection. When their English teacher had given them the three options, Neil turned to ask Todd what he was going to choose and saw him already pulling out

both Dracula and Frankenstein.

"I bet Todd prefers Dracula," Neil muttered to himself with a scowl. "And he knows his stuff." Todd *did* know his stuff. He even had William Shakespeare in his book pile, and Neil thought that anyone who read Shakespeare for pleasure must've been really smart. Neil decided to alphabetize Todd's little book collection to keep himself from having to go to his own room for a little bit longer. He went slowly, triple checking by saying the alphabet every time he put another book down, but he stopped when he got to a book with no title. He figured that the cover had just fallen off, but when he opened it and read the first page, he quickly threw it shut and set it besides him. It definitely wasn't a book. Well, not a real one at least.

Neil knew Todd's handwriting better than he knew his own. He even tried to mimic the way Todd wrote his letters when he wasn't looking because his writing was so pretty. So luckily for his moral code, he hadn't actually *read* any of what he'd opened the second he realized Todd had written it. Hiding a secret journal in a stack of books nobody would ever touch was a pretty smart thing to do, making Neil feel even worse that he'd stumbled upon it. And he hadn't even read anything. What made him feel bad was how much he wanted to. Did he really think there was something in there that Todd hadn't told him already? Todd told him everything. He told Todd everything. It was a very fair exchange and Neil's journal back home didn't have a single entry in it about something Todd didn't already know about. Granted all he wrote in that journal was how much he wanted to be a doctor and how good he was doing at school because he knew his father read it, but at the very least he'd told Todd most of that stuff was fake.

But there was that couple of weeks they didn't talk, where Todd went to *Jeffery* with his problems... Maybe he wrote something about Neil in there. Something about how he hated him now. If that was the case, Neil had to know about it. But then if it didn't... he would've had read Todd's journal for absolutely nothing and he'd feel even worse about it. He spent a lot longer than he should've trying to keep himself from grabbing the book and flinging it open, and in the end he failed. He made a bargain with himself. Anything that wasn't about him wasn't his business. He'd skim through and if he saw his own name, he'd read a sentence and then put the book back. That seemed a fair deal to him, especially if Todd was writing hate letters about him in there.

Neil found his name a couple of times and discovered that Todd had taken extra measures to make sure absolutely no one understood what

he had written in there. It was written in the same old English as Knox was probably reading in the Scarlet Letter. Neil didn't pay enough attention in English to decipher the first couple of paragraphs he'd found about himself. Some of them were written like the Declaration of Independence and some were written in fluent Shakespearean. Neil wouldn't be surprised if a couple of pages started with 'We The People...'

After trying to figure out what kind of love poem '*Did press true those lips? Was p'rson the right? Did hisself knoweth? It giveth me sight?'* was for at least five minutes because his name was written at the top of the page, Neil nearly called it a day. But he flipped one more page and found an angry passage written in actual English, and then suddenly he wished he hadn't touched the journal at all. He hadn't entirely forgiven himself for the bullshit he'd pulled during that couple of weeks, but now he thought he was never going to. Not if it made Todd throw away his whole Shakespearean journal writing persona just to curse Neil. He closed the book and slid it into the middle of his half-alphabetized pile. He'd learned a few things during that read.

1. He was an asshole.

2. Todd's birthday was last week.

He never knew the specific day of Todd's birthday, but he assumed it had been one of the days his parents kidnapped him for, but it wasn't, and Neil hadn't even noticed. A week before, everyone had celebrated his birthday, and a few days after, no one even knew it was Todd's. Jeffery had gone to dinner that weekend with his family, so obviously even they didn't know when Todd's birthday was. Neil felt worse than he thought he even could, and he ran straight to Meeks and Pitts' room, hoping they were in there. He had a favor to make up.

They weren't in there, but the radio was, and that was all Neil needed. He wrote a quick little note and slammed it on Meeks' desk before bolting out with the radio on the slim chance the two of them would return right that second. He dropped it off in Todd's room and then ran back to his own, crossing his fingers on the way there that he wouldn't walk into anything weird. What he walked into wasn't weird, but it sure wasn't what he expected. Charlie and Knox were rather cozy and Knox was actually reading Charlie the Scarlett Letter. Neil didn't even think twice about it, though, and just started talking too fast for his own good.

"You! Sleep in here tonight! Me in your room? Good? Okay?"

Somehow Knox understood and his only response was, "Are you going to clean it?"

Neil rolled his eyes. "When does Todd get back?"

"After dinner," Knox said.

"Okay, okay cool."

"What is this sudden adrenaline rush, my man?" Charlie asked like he was a hippie, but then he suddenly got excited. "Did oxygen finally get to your brain? Did you finally realize Frankenstein is better!?"

Neil couldn't find it within himself to respond, so he just jumped on top of Charlie and started hitting him. Knox, being Knox, slid away to remain neutral until someone called on him for assistance, allowing Neil easier access to karate chop Charlie in the throat. Charlie tried to call out for Knox's help, but Neil covered his mouth so he wouldn't be able to. Charlie asked for help with his eyes, but Knox looked away. Neil was in the middle of smirking when he was suddenly thrown off the bed entirely, landing hard on the ground, not even having enough time to think before Charlie was on top of him to issue him karma.

—

It was an hour till lights out and Neil and Knox had situated themselves for the plan, wearing each other's sleep clothes for when the hall monitor checked around the rooms to make sure everyone was in the right one. The only major difference between Knox and Neil at that point was that they wore such different kinds of clothes. Neil felt so stuffy in Knox's pajamas that he had actually brought a pair of his own to change into once he knew it was safe. In the mean time, though, he picked up the room—not because Knox asked—and made it look as close as possible to how it looked when Todd had left two days prior, then he waited, trying not to stare at the black journal on the bed side table. Not his businesses. He knew that now.

Ten minutes later, Todd finally came back, and Neil jumped on him before he could even process that it wasn't his roommate in his room. Once he did, though, he didn't seem to really care and tackled Neil with as much force as he'd been met with. He had the hatred for his family expression on his face, so Neil grabbed his stuff for him and dragged it into the room. Todd tried to stop him, but, as always, it was hard to stop him when his mind was already set on something. "C'mon, Neil. What are you even doing in here?"

"I made you a promise," Neil said simply and then walked over to Knox's desk, opening the top drawer and pulling out the radio he had hidden in there. Meeks and Pitts hadn't come looking for him yet, and it was getting late, so Neil had hope he would get to keep the radio for the night. He set it on top of the desk and looked at Todd. "I should probably follow through."

"Oh," Todd said, "Uh, you don't hafta'. I was bein' kinda dramatic when I said that."

"I don't care what you were being," Neil dismissed, "I said the words 'I promise.' I promised you, so I'm following through."

Todd smiled. "Okay, Neil, whatever you want."

Neil widely smiled back and then turned around to try and figure the radio out. If *Love Potion No. 9* started playing he might've had a couple issues trying to stay focused. "Let's see." He turned around, turned knobs, and pushed buttons. Nothing was happening, so Todd walked up behind him and peeked over his shoulder. Neil waved him away. "No, I got it."

"Do you?" Todd asked, "Did you try that one?" He pointed at a button.

"Yes I tried that one."

"Will you try again?"

"But I already tried."

"Push the button, Neil," Todd deadpanned, and Neil looked away from him and pressed the button, and suddenly static was coming through the radio. Todd rolled his eyes and pushed Neil out of the way to start turning knobs himself, except when he did it they could hear the faint beginnings of a song. "Hey!" Todd said happily, "You hear that?"

"Turn it up." Neil dropped on his knees next to Todd and pressed his ear to the speaker as Todd turned up the volume. Neil listened for a millisecond before knowing exactly what song it was. He snapped accordingly with the beat and slowly got up, singing as smoothly as he could. "*When the night has come and the land is dark, and the moon is the only light we'll see."* He looked over and saw Todd's blank expression. "Come on! You don't even know *Stand By Me*? Do you even listen to music?"

"It sounds kind of familiar..." Todd said.

Neil did not tone it down even though they were twenty minutes away from lights out. "*So darlin, darlin! Stand by me. Ohhh stand by me!"* Todd looked very embarrassed as his idiot friend gave the song absolutely all he could. Neil spun about the room, never letting up his according snaps and tried to get Todd to join him. "Come on, Toddsie."

"I'm having enough fun over here, thanks."

"More fun over here..." Neil slowly approached and then snatched Todd's arm to pull him in the middle of the room. He then grabbed his hands in own and tried his best to get Todd moving on his own. Eventually Todd let up and Neil took it up a level, not ever letting Todd have a moment of piece again. "*Just as long as you stand, stand by me."* Neil sung as infectious as he could until he finally got Todd to join in on the chorus with him, ending up twirling him out of happiness. "Is it not groovy?"

"No, I think you're dumb," Todd said and Neil pulled him closer in retaliation for that comment, but not ever stopping his swaying. Todd laughed. "But you look so happy I don't wanna ruin it."

"You could never," Neil said with a smile. "I'm always happy when—" He looked into Todd's eyes momentarily and faltered. "—when there's music playing."

"Mhm," Todd said, and he really was agreeing, but Neil couldn't help but interpret it as Todd knowing what he was about to say. Neil tried to convince himself that he actually wasn't about to say anything, but that was hard to do when that and worse things were still floating in his mind, wanting all to come out of his mouth without permission. He was distracted from that when something even worse happened. Todd turned his head and pressed his cheek into Neil's shoulder, yawning widely, and that's when Neil realized how tired his friend was. He continued to support him while *Stand By Me* looped back to the beginning. Neil was going to say nothing and let himself enjoy the moment, but Todd spoke. "Missed you."

Neil let out a little laugh. "It's only been a couple days."

"Still missed you," Todd said, "Unless that's too flamboyant for you, mm?"

"No—" Neil said quickly, "I missed you too. Charlie is a pain. Dracula is cooler than Frankenstein, right?"

"Definitely."

"Uh... Happy Birthday, by the way."

Todd nuzzled his head. "Thanks."

"Happy *late* birthday."

"Huh?" Todd whipped his head up. "How did you know?"

"Doesn't matter," Neil responded, "And I'm not missing it next year, got it?"

"Still hink' yur' dumb..."

"Do you wanna go to bed?" Neil didn't really care about the answer. He turned off the radio and was already leading Todd to his bed. When he started shortening his words, he was about to pass out, and Neil would've rather not been caught by the hall monitor with Todd passed out in his arms.

"Prob'ly." Todd yawned. "Yur' staying?"

"I'm not wearing Knox's pajamas for nothing."

"You look stupid," Todd said.

"You look stupid," Neil responded, "Go to bed before you forget how to form a sentence."

"Wil' you stay?"

"I am staying, idiot."

"No, here," Todd patted his bed.

Neil realized what he meant and his eyes widened. *Yes.* But he hated how quickly his brain came up with the answer when he was sure it was actually *no*. Either way, he couldn't think of a reason behind either of those, and he was afraid if he tried to say one of them, the yes was gonna slip out, so he thought quickly. "They can't see Knox's bed empty. Sorry, Todd."

"Thas' not why," Todd shook his head, "You hink' I ave' a lil' crush on you."

"No!" Neil said, realizing he needed to stop talking so fast. "No, I don't think that."

"M' not gon' turn ya' gay, Neil," He said, "I jus' was lone' all weekend. Jeff din't even talk tuh' me. Yur' mind is a lil' bit gay to hink' that don't ya' know?"

"Well, as I'm sure Charlie would say..." Neil said, "All our minds are a lil' bit gay."

Todd laughed. "E' would say hat'"

"Is it just the h's you forget how to say?" Neil asked fondly.

"Maybe... or maybe..." Todd started, "Yur' keepin' me up."

"Of course," Neil said and turned around to turn the light off. "My bad. I'm sorry, Todd."

"Night, Neil."

"Goodnight."

Chapter End Notes

im bad at writing romantic moments so very sorry if that just like... sucked

Fifth—What's Christmas?

Chapter Summary

The Christmas concert comes around again and sends Neil into a frenzy.

Chapter Notes

CW// Homophobic themes, internalized homophobia

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nocturnal Emission.

That was the term Neil had found while desperately searching through multiple dictionaries in the Welton library. Most of the definitions for words of that nature were scribbled out, and Neil couldn't imagine which old man had sat down with a marker just to do that, but because of it he had to go on a scavenger hunt until he found a dictionary that was actually helpful. And it did help. Nocturnal Emissions. Unable to be controlled. Common. Everything was fine. He wasn't weird. In fact, he was normal. This happened to everyone. Well, maybe not exactly this. Maybe not everyone had inappropriate dreams about their best friend, but he didn't know that for sure. Maybe they did. He was hoping they did. He was hoping he was normal.

Either way, it was a very alarming way to start the day of the annual Welton Christmas concert. A very religious day where, regardless if it was normal or not, Neil would probably be crucified. But it *was* normal. He had nothing to be worried about, so he was able to easily push it to the back of his mind and not give it another thought. When he walked into the showers after exiting the library, he didn't even notice at all how Todd's hair was slicked back. He meandered over to the windowsill where the gets-ready-super-quickly crew was already sitting and looked over to see the usual suspects, Charlie and Cameron, fussing over their hair in the mirror.

"Hint: Scary." Neil turned his head to see Pitts pointing toward a drawing on the window and he smiled. Some things never changed.

Meeks adjusted his glasses and squinted at the drawing, and, of course since it was Steven Meeks, he figured out what it was immediately. "The Chupacabra?" He guessed and Pitts whooped a little and wiped away the drawing with his sleeve.

"What?" Knox asked, "The Chupacabra is not that scary."

Todd looked wearily at the boy next to him. "The Chupacabra isn't that scary?"

"Oh, sweet little Todd," Charlie said, not turning from the mirror. He was combing a very specific piece of hair that was definitely already efficiently styled, but Neil could also see that he was trying his hardest to get in Cameron's way and annoy him, so he let it slide. "The guard dog. Not the real Chupacabra. Come on, Neil, do you teach your boy nothing?"

"I swear I've mentioned it," Neil defended.

"That makes a lot more sense," Todd sighed out and looked back at Knox, "I thought you might've just been kinda insane."

"Well, I am," Knox responded.

"I'm going to have a great time sleeping tonight."

"Neil," Cameron suddenly whined, "Can you help me? I can't get this right." Cameron gestured toward the back of his head and Neil reluctantly got up. He didn't want to help Cameron at all, he was still mad at him, but he also knew the so-called manly man would throw a hissy fit if his hair wasn't perfect. Neil didn't need Jeffery Anderson to come tell them to hurry up again. He wanted this concert to be over with. Sing a couple songs about Jesus, get yelled at by his father, and then cry in his room while Charlie was off doing whatever. It sounded like a perfect night.

"Your hair is gettin' too curly for this, Cam," Neil said as he attempted

to run the comb through the back, continuously getting it caught on different sections of Cameron's hair. He tugged a little to release the comb from its hair prison and Cameron winced at the pain. "I think you might just have to leave it flat."

"Well, I can't do that."

"Come on, weirdo," Charlie complained, "Nobody can even see the back of your head. Who do you even do that for? Jesus?"

Cameron snapped, "You don't know what I do for Jesus."

Charlie let out an obnoxious laugh, "Yeah and I don't want to know."

"Why are you laughing like that?"

Knox gave Cameron a slightly apologetic look. "Cause you made it sound kinda weird, dude."

"Wha—Neil!?" Cameron turned around and looked upon the boy for help. Neil stood there helplessly with the comb in his hands, looking at Cameron and asking with his facial expression what he was supposed to do about it. He should've known better that no one could control Charlie. "Come on! Don't say stuff like that so near Christmas."

"What's Christmas again?" Charlie asked, trying not to let his lips curl into a smirk. Cameron grabbed his comb from Neil's hand and tossed it at the boy. Charlie ducked and then stood back up and pointed accusingly at Cameron. "Hey! What if that was a genuine question?! I am Jewish!"

"You're Jewish?" Todd said with absolute shock, and Meeks patted him on the shoulder, telling him something about the previous year when they had all reacted the exact same way to the news.Yet that wasn't even Todd's concern. "And they still make you sing in this thing?"

"Fantastic point, Todd," Charlie said, finally turning away from the mirror and looking down at his tie. Neil had done it for him before he even had the chance to mess it up, tying the knot so tightly it could've choked him, but apparently Charlie had gotten crafty because he loosened the tie completely and wrapped it back around his neck like a scarf. "Funny how the world works. They'll continue to forget I'm Jewish until we're learning about the Holocaust."

"The... what?" Todd asked.

"Never mind that, Toddsie, don't worry your pretty little head about it." Charlie walked over and patted the boy on the head. "Not yet, at least. I expect all your sympathy in the future."

"What are you even talking about?"

"Like I said," Charlie started, "Don't worry your pretty little head about it."

Eventually, Cameron finished with his hair and the group were able to leave the bathrooms and find their way into the back room behind the main hall of Welton. Neil felt the same familiar feeling of nervousness creep up his spine. He hated doing things in front of his father, and he was sure he would never stop hating it. He wished this stupid thing was optional, but then again he'd probably get yelled at for *not* doing it if he decided against it. Maybe he'd convert religions when the Welton staff stopped shoving Catholicism down Charlie's throat so he could benefit from it too. Someone on his mom's side of the family was Jewish. He forgot who, but they were there somewhere.

The previous year, he'd stood between Knox and Charlie. Charlie had been in his own little world, probably imagining himself walking down a red carpet after winning an aware for his 'amazing singing talents,' but Knox had noticed that Neil was cowering. He didn't have Knox this time. Neil had gotten too tall and had been moved further to the middle, Knox stayed at the end. Charlie was somehow the tallest, so he was all the way in the middle next to Pitts. Meeks was in the second row, and Neil was starting to lose hope for comfort until he realized Todd was taller than he remembered him being. That plus the fact that the kid who usually stood in front of Neil was sick was the

reason Hager ended up moving Todd right in front of him.

"Great, I still have to listen to your horrible singing," Todd whispered to Neil in the few short moments of free time they had to stand before lining up like they were students at a military school. Hager had just told Neil to make sure Todd ended up in the right place, and Neil wanted to be angry at him for underestimating Todd like that, but it was unfortunately accurate. Todd was smart, but he was dumb when it came to doing anything in front of anyone.

Neil kicked him. "Shut up. I'm a prodigy."

"Yeah? A prodigy like Charlie?" Todd joked.

"A prodigy like Sinatra," Neil said snobbily, "I love the art of performing."

Todd rolled his eyes. "Sure you do."

"I do!" Neil insisted.

Todd kicked the side of Neil's dress shoe with his own. "You seem to be shaking in your boots, Sinatra."

"That's—" Neil looked at the ground, "That's because my father's out there. He doesn't like when I do stuff like this and then he still finds a way to tell me how bad I did. I can't win."

Todd dropped any joking tone he had previously felt and replaced it with sympathy and regret. "Well, who is he to judge a boy's choir? Beethoven?"

Neil laughed. "He's Beethoven when it comes to music, Newton when it comes to math, Einstein when it comes to science—he's a really flexible person obviously."

"Really? Cause I think he's a stiff," Todd said. Neil didn't say anything to that. Todd sounded too angry and Neil didn't want to verbally agree that his father sucked too many times in a year or it wasn't going to end well for him. He looked back at the ground and saw Todd's foot tapping nervously, and he remembered he wasn't the only one with problems. Todd couldn't even read out loud during English class. This was the poor kid's worst nightmare.

"At least we're both gonna have a bad time," Neil poked Todd. "And, uh, I'll be behind you the entire time, if that makes you feel better at

all."

Todd didn't get time to respond, as they were then rushed into formation and the concert was beginning. It went by slower than the first one had. The first one was done in a blink, this one felt at least an hour long. Each song dragged slowly on and Neil's heart beat faster and faster with each note, and it wasn't even because of his father's disapproving looks. Todd's hands had been behind his back, clasped in one another, and as the first song begun, Neil saw his nails digging into his palms. Hard. He didn't let himself get too distracted by it, having to keep eye contact with the furthest wall to make it look like he was immersed in his own performance, but when he saw Todd still scratching himself up by the end of the song, he couldn't just do nothing.

He subtly reached his hand forward and pulled Todd's right hand from his left and let Todd clutch on his hand instead. Luckily, he didn't dig his nails into Neil's palm, but he did squeeze it a lot. So much that Neil almost thought he was trying to say something to him in Morse code. Todd didn't let go for the rest of the performance and neither did Neil, and that's why everything seemed so slow. Neil liked feeling like he was helping his friend. Even if it was at the cost of his own blood circulation. And when it was done and Todd's row was exiting, he didn't let go of Neil's hand until the very last moment.

Neil was very happy about it until he realized that his father had noticed. Neil was happy about it until he was being dragged by his ear and thrown outside in the cold. And Neil was happy about it until there were frozen tear stains on his face. No matter what Neil said, it was dismissed. His father didn't care that Todd was Neil's best friend and he was nervous, all he cared about was that he had embarrassed him in front of everyone in the hall. Everyone had seen it, he was convinced, and now they were going to think his son was a—

Well, Neil didn't need to go over the whole thing in his head again. He tried, really, not to let it bother him. He wasn't a—he wasn't. He didn't like Todd like that. He. Liked. Girls. And he knew it. So someone else telling him something completely different shouldn't have affected him, right? And it wasn't even a bad thing, either. He had told Todd that if *he* was, he wouldn't care. But then again, if Todd was a serial killer Neil probably wouldn't care. But then he thought about Charlie's weird behavior that one night in fourth grade. He didn't care then either. If Charlie was, if Todd was, he didn't care. He wasn't disgusted by the thought of it. But if it was *him*, it was suddenly gross.

Neil ignored everyone who tried to talk to him, even Mrs. Anderson and who knew what she wanted to say to him. He went straight to his room and buried himself under his blankets, intending to sleep the misery away, until he remembered how he had woken up that morning, and suddenly laying in his bed didn't sound like a good idea anymore. He angrily tore off all of his sheets and threw them into the laundry, and even when he was staring at his bare, uncomfortable mattress, he didn't regret it. He was going to freeze to death that night, but it didn't matter as long as the disgusting thing he did that morning was washed away. He even flipped over his mattress to the other side. It wasn't normal. He wasn't normal.

"Hey, Charlie and Knox want to stay together tonight to finish some weird thing they started this morning, and Charlie had already made camp on my bed so I—are you okay?" Todd walked in and shut the door behind him, carrying a book in his hand. They'd finished *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* just the previous day, and Neil had been really excited to know which book Todd was going to pick out next. But right then he couldn't feel it within himself to get excited over anything. Hell, he couldn't even be worried about the fact that Charlie and Knox had *definitely* lied to Todd and they were *more than likely* going to break into someone's classroom tonight.

"M' fine," Neil shrugged and sat down on his naked mattress that proved he was less than fine. Todd was next to him in two seconds, dropping the book he was holding right next to them. Neil saw it was Dracula. Todd was doing the English reading, so obviously they weren't going to do their 'thing' that time. "I would sleep on top of Charlie's comforter. I dunno what he does under there."

"I think I'd rather be warm and covered in Charlie germs than freezing and clean."

"You say that, but Charlie germs are a whole different species," Neil responded, "I would give you my bed but, it needed cleaning."

"Why? You spill something?" Todd asked.

"Yeah," Neil answered, "If you sleep on top of his comforter at least we'll both be freezing."

"No," Todd said and stood up, wandering over to Neil and Charlie's shared closet. He bent down and picked up the extra blankets that were apparently kept in there. He threw them straight at Neil's face and Neil didn't even bother moving it off his head, feeling the bed dip

next to him and knowing Todd was there again. "What's wrong?'

"Nothing," Neil said from under the blanket.

"Yeah, right," Todd responded, "I'm not buying it. Was it your dad?"

Neil tore the blankets off his head. "Maybe."

"What'd he say this time?" He said with a tone full of distaste. "Because you were great, I think. I heard like four voices around me and they were all pretty good, so you were good."

"Thanks, Todd," Neil sighed, "But that's not it. He saw—" He gestured vaguely in the air. "You know."

Todd somehow understood. "And what? He threw a fit about it?"

"Kinda."

"I thought you didn't care."

"I *don't*!" Neil tried, but his voice cracked and both him and Todd were unconvinced. "... I don't."

"I feel like you do," Todd said, "But the only reason you would care *this* much is if—you know, you *were*."

"I'm not."

"Are you sure?"

"Are *you*?"

Todd was taken aback. "What? Yes, I'm sure. This isn't about me, Neil."

"Well, I'm sure too!"

"Okay!" Todd yelled, "Then it's fine, right?"

"But I—" Neil groaned angrily, "I don't like how upset it makes me."

"Why does it make you upset then?"

"I don't know," Neil breathed, "Can we just forget this conversation happened? And the one the other week?"

Todd sighed and shook his head. "Sure, if that's what'll make you feel better."

"... If you were I wouldn't care."

"I'm not!"

"Okay, me neither."

"Okay," Todd repeated, "Do you feel better now?"

"...No."

"Okay," Todd said again and shoved Neil down on his bed. He then angrily threw the blanket over Neil's body, grabbed his book, and sat as heavily as he could on Neil's chest, leaving against the wall. "I'm gonna read."

"Right there?" Neil asked.

"Yeah, I'm gonna read out loud," Todd said, "And you're going to fall asleep and wake up tomorrow all happy again, okay?"

"How am I supposed to fall asleep when you're crushing my lungs."

"Ugh, cry baby." Todd rolled his eyes and then slid backward so he was sitting on the bed, but his legs were still across Neil's chest. "Better? If not, cry more about it."

"I don't like sleeping on my back."

"Cry about it."

"Todd, please."

"'*The first thing Van Helsing said to to me when we met at Liverpool Street was—*'"

"*Todd,* I'm serious."

""*Have you said anything to our young friend, to lover of her?' 'No' I said 'I waited till I had seen you as I said in my—*"" Neil tried to shove Todd off of him but was met with a very heavy smack to the forehead. Apparently Dracula hurt. Todd resumed his reading with a glare. ""*As I said in my telegram—*""

Neil gave up and decided to make the best of it, listening to the words come out of Todd's mouth. He read things out loud much differently than Neil did. Neil acted out every line that it was a line of dialogue or a stage direction, but Todd didn't. He was calm, but he still put

emotion and tone behind each of his words. It was like listening to a live reading from the author themself. Neil didn't ever think he was the type of person to fall asleep while being read to. His mom had tried when he was younger, but it always woke him up more because he wanted to stay up and hear the ending, but his eyelids were drooping by the time Todd had turned the page.

Neil watched Todd as he read and he was so entranced he didn't even realize that Todd had dropped one of his hands from the book to hold Neil's, but it wasn't for Todd this time. He still squeezed, but it wasn't out of fear. It was him letting him know that even though he was being a total ass right then, he just wanted Neil to get some rest. He just wanted Neil to be happy.

Neil fell asleep within the hour.

Chapter End Notes

im getting irritated at my own slow burn i just want them to kith

Fifth—You're My Person

Chapter Summary

> As per usual, Neil freaks out about something and Todd absolutely owns him.

Chapter Notes

> CW// Homophobic themes, homophobic language, internalized homophobia

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil constantly wondered why the second semester of his years at Welton always seemed to be the worst. Last year it had been horrible because he was the debate team's Cinderella, Jeffery Anderson couldn't stop being a dick, and finals for fourth graders were somehow really intense. This time it was because he was *on* the debate team, Jeffery Anderson was always a dick, and finals for fifth graders were even more intense. He couldn't even look forward to Spring break. When he thought about it, he only feared he would lose all the test practice he'd ingrained into his memory. Also, that's when the debate tournament was, and it never really occurred to Neil that he would have to go to a tournament. He just prayed he didn't have to speak. His practice was minimal and he was bad at speaking in long sentences when he was actually paying attention to the words he was saying. If he was lucky, he could just pretend to be the water boy.

He didn't remember the last time he had a proper conversation with any of his friends besides Charlie. Probably PeeksMitts week. *Ugh.* Even in his head that sounded so stupid. Meeks' and Pitts' birthdays were in the same week in February, and apparently they couldn't just call it 'Meeks and Pitts week.' They attempted to combine their names and had come up with Peeks and Mitts respectively. They couldn't choose which one to pick, and this is basically a long-winded way for Neil to say they'd been calling it *PeeksMitts week* since fourth grade. He hoped it stopped soon. PeeksMitts week was entirely dedicated to the both of them and it was probably when the boys spent the most time together. During the day, they would do something semi-boring with Cameron, and during the night they would have fun without him. Neil felt bad leaving him out sometimes, but it was hard to feel bad for Cameron a lot of the time.

He hadn't even hung out with Todd in a while either, and he usually spent every second with him. The only people he saw on a regular basis were Charlie, Cameron, and Jeffery, which was the *worst* trifecta of people to have to deal with on a daily basis. Of course he couldn't get away from Charlie. Even if they weren't roommates he would never be free from Charlie Dalton. Debate practice was daily, and now on *Sundays* now that the tournament was coming up. And unfortunately, Cameron dedicated his entire time to school, so when Neil couldn't get one of his other friends to settle down and study with him, he had to reluctantly trudge down the hallway to Cameron's room. Neil could absolutely not get schoolwork done alone. You might think being around other people would distract him, but it actually made him feel better. He wished he knew how he could fix that, because when his father gave him summer school work he was locked in his room alone until he figured it out.

Neil particularly missed reading books with Todd. He had never really been a fan of any literature, but reading with Todd was fun. They hadn't read another book since finishing their respective English projects about Dracula at the beginning of the semester. Todd hadn't picked up another book yet either, and Neil felt bad thinking it might've been because of him. He hated when Todd didn't do things because of him. He also hated when Todd *did* things because of him.

Neil was sitting at his desk with his math homework in front of him and he didn't understand a question of it. He hated math so much. He never understood it. Nothing about it, not a single thing, ever made any sense to him. It was the only thing he actually did alone. He never wanted anyone to see how stupid he was when it came to math. And he was *stupid*. Sometimes when you say six plus one is six... you just can't recover from it. Charlie was out with Knox and Meeks, doing who knows what, so he had the room to himself. He expected Todd, or even Meeks, to stop by soon enough, so that's why he barely reacted when his door viciously swung open.

But when he heard loud angry footsteps approaching behind him, he knew it was neither of his friends. He didn't have time to look over his shoulder before it was grabbed and he was being tugged out of his chair. He came face to face with Jeffery Anderson. An absolutely livid Jeffery Anderson at that. Neil stepped back from his irritated breathing. "What do you want?"

"What do I want?" Jeffery asked back, "Neil, I told you yesterday, we have things to do today. Plan out the teams for the tournament in a *month*? Do you ever unclog your ears from the weird bullshit your

friends shove in there daily."

Oh shit. Neil did actually forget about that, but only because it wasn't important and he didn't care at all. Jeffery could make a timetable all on his lonesome. and they sure as hell didn't need to be doing it a month in advance. What he needed to tell Jeffery was that if he failed his math class he wouldn't be able to do anything at all, so when you weighed it all out... multiplication actually seemed way more important in the long run. It was his fault, but he was also at the point of the year where he was sick of Jeffery. "Since when do you suddenly have an urge to engage in actual responsibilities." He was angry too, but that doesn't mean he didn't regret it the second it slipped out of his mouth.

Especially since Jeffery's eyes set on fire. "What's *that* supposed to mean?"

Well, he'd already dug his grave. "You literally do *nothing* all the time. Do you even know how to debate at all? Or have you just given up because you know you can't and you hate being wrong?"

"Don't gamble with your luck, Perry," Jeffery said, "You're not even supposed to be on the team. You think you have a right to say any of the shit you're saying right now?"

"Yes," Neil answered, "I'm the *vice president,* and you know what? I don't do anything important either. We both do *nothing*."

"Did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed?" Jeffery pressed, walking closer to Neil and lowering his voice in anger. Jeffery was in eighth grade. He could behead Neil before Neil could even form an apology, but somehow, in that moment, Neil didn't care at all. He always felt like this when Jeffery was being a jerk. "Or is this attitude gonna start being a daily thing?"

"It could be," Neil shrugged.

"You sure about that?" The debate team president responded, "You want me to tell your daddy about all the trouble you cause? Bout' how much you suck?" Neil felt his blood run cold and he didn't say another word. Jeffery scoffed. "That's what I thought. Tomorrow during practice, you're cleaning, and after, we're getting the timetables done. I suggest you get it together in the meantime." He flicked Neil in the forehead and stormed out of the room the same way he'd stormed in. Neil wasn't aware his need to please his father was as public as it apparently was, and it hurt hearing that he was a disappointment to

his dad from *someone else*.

He closed his math binder and stood in his room for a silent moment. He no longer felt like doing anything. He felt like crap. He blinked and then he was somehow in the hallway, walking toward Todd's room. Usually he knocked, this time he didn't, but it was okay because Todd was just sitting at his desk writing in that notebook. The one with no title that Neil had accidentally...well, purposely read. He hadn't touched it since at least. When Todd saw him, he slammed it shut and slid it in on of his drawers. "Hey."

"Hi," He responded.

Todd furrowed his eyebrows. "Are you alright?"

"Do I seem not alright?"

"Just a little bit. But I can't tell if its just school stress or not." Todd straightened up his desk and put anything else he had out away, setting his full attention on Neil, who felt like he didn't even deserve a sliver of it. "So?"

"Oh, sorry." Neil rubbed his eyes, realizing that he had completely zoned out staring at Todd. "It's not just school stress. Somethin' else."

"Well, what else?"

"Kinda don't wan' talk about it."

"So what *do* you wanna do?" Todd asked, "You came here for a reason, clearly."

"I dunno."

Todd squinted and attempted to look deep into Neil's eyes. "What's wrong?"

"I just said—"

"Do I ever care?" Todd interrupted, "What's wrong?"

Neil scratched the back of his neck. "Nothing, nothing... your brother is just... kind of a jerk."

Todd stood up immediately. "What'd he do?"

"It's fine!" Neil assured once he saw the deadly glare in Todd's eyes.

He'd never seen that kind of look on his friend before, and it kinda scared him. He led Todd over to his bed where they both sat down. "He just... you know how he gets around this time."

"He's actually like this all the time," Todd rolled his eyes, "What did he do?"

"He didn' do anything."

"As if," Todd said, "I know you don't wanna talk about it, but he's *my* brother and if something he did made you upset, I'm not gonna let him get away with it."

"He just got mad at me for not turning up for some debate thing," Neil said, "It was my fault, anyway, so it was fine."

Todd slumped. "You're really not gonna tell me?"

"No, I don't think so."

"I'll go beat it out of him."

"Do you really think I care if he gets beat up right now?" Neil asked.

"I s'pose not, but I *think* you care about whether or not I get expelled," Todd said, "And I'm not trying to force you or anything, but if you don't tell me I will go knock his teeth out."

"Fine, don't do that," Neil said quickly, "He just said he'd tell my dad I was doin' bad if I kept being a disappointment. It's nothing."

"He *what!?"* Todd screamed and jumped up from the bed immediately. Neil caught his arm and pulled him back.

"You said you wouldn't."

"No I did not," Todd struggled in Neil's grip, "I never specifically said that. Not my fault if you assumed. Lemme go!"

"No!" Neil yelled to match his tone, not that he really wanted to yell at Todd. He wanted to let Todd go, go with him, and beat the crap out of Jeffery together, but that could only happen in a perfect world. What Neil was living in right now was a semi-perfect world, and it would only remain semi-perfect if Todd *didn't* get expelled from Welton. "He was right! I'm not that upset about it, anyway! Just forget it, Todd."

Suddenly Todd stilled and when Neil looked over, he saw that the

death glare had morphed into a look of absolute sadness. "You think he's right?"

Neil didn't even realize what he had said, but when he did, he regretted it. He regretted making Todd feel sad. "Yeah. I mean, I guess so."

"You think that?" Todd repeated, "You *really* think that?"

"I mean a lil' bit—" Neil was cut off when Todd surged forward and wrapped his arms around Neil's shoulders, and he didn't know what to do. Not that Todd *wasn't* touchy. For gods sake, Todd's favorite thing to do was sit on Neil to annoy him, but affectionate touches. They were rare. Even beyond the fact Neil was trying not to be... well, weird. Todd just didn't like touching people sometimes, so stuff like this, it shocked Neil. "What're you doing?"

"You're wrong," Todd said, "And I'm hugging you because you're wrong."

"That's not usually what you do when I'm wrong."

"Shut up. This is different."

"How is this different?"

"Because you're *awesome,* Neil." Todd pulled back to stare back into Neil's eyes as he said this. "And the fact you're agreeing that you aren't —come on. Have you met yourself? You can't actually think Jeff's right."

"Oh yeah?" Neil asked, "What's so *awesome* about me Todd?" He stood up off the bed and started walking around the room. "Cameron says one thing to me and I ditch you for two weeks, I'm the reason everyone at school calls you a fairy, and I'm having such a hard time right now trying to *not* say that this is too... well, that we're too close. And I don't even have a reason to say that. I just—I just suck!"

"Would you shut up?" Todd stood up too and he tried to be intimidating, but, while he wasn't short, the top of his head only reached Neil's chin. He had to stand a foot away to still be able to hold his threatening eye contact.

"But—"

"No! Shhhhhhh." Todd stepped forward and put his hand over Neil's

mouth. "Shushushushsushshuhshh."

"What are you—"

"ShhhhHHSHhsUHSUhsuh"

"This is so—"

Todd put his other hand over Neil's mouth too. "shUSH!" Neil didn't try to respond that time, but Todd still didn't take his hands back. "I can't let you talk. You're being too dumb. So what you hate gay stuff sometimes? You think I care? First of all, we've established *multiple* times that *neither* of us are. Second of all, have you met anyone that goes to this school? Fuck, Neil, have you met anyone in the world? You think I'm not used to being called a fairy? You think *you're* the reason? I write poems and use scented shampoo, it has absolutely nothing to do with you." Neil was bewildered by not only what Todd was saying, but the fact he was still talking. Todd usually wore himself out. The boy hated talking. "And if you're gonna keep acting so ridiculous about our *friendship* then just tell me right now and I'll stop bothering ya'. I'm not making any accommodations just cause *you* think I'm too touchy or too *gay* at times, alright? If you hate me, you can just say that. I'm not changing dude. I act like this because you're the best, and I'm never gonna stop thinking you're the best."

Todd's hands had fallen from Neil's face during his rant. Mostly because halfway through it Todd had turned around, giving up his ability to make eye contact for the ability to talk as much as he needed to. Neil felt horrible. "...Todd."

"How can you not think you're the best?" Todd asked, "I can't even explain it, Neil. Everyone loves being around you, everyone likes to talk about you, and I don't understand how you can know that and not think that you're the best. The best person to everyone is *one* person, and you have so many people who chose you as their one person. I don't get it."

"It's you."

Todd finally turned around, and Neil assumed this would be the end of his speaking in long paragraphs. That was confirmed when Todd let out the single syllable of, "Huh?"

"You're my person," Neil clarified, "My best person. You're the best to me. Everything else sucks in comparison to you. *I* suck in comparison to you. I don't hate you. I could never—" Neil stopped himself because

he was at a loss for words, having absolutely no idea what to say next. Todd helped the silence by hugging Neil again, and finally Neil felt better. He took in every second of this moment so he could remember it for the next few months he knew he was going to stay upset. He knew he couldn't stay upset if he was thinking about this. Neil remembered to hug back this time, and he couldn't even remember why he was sad when he walked in.

"You're still stupid."

"I'm always stupid."

"I'll still kill em' if you want."

"You've done your part, thanks."

"Do you wanna switch with Knox tonight?"

"I... I don't know. I have math homework still."

"I'll rephrase. I want you to switch with Knox tonight."

"Okay, then I will."

Chapter End Notes

i have no idea what this was i have just wanted to write neil and todd content for a long time and i had no idea what to write. but angst?? is this angst?? i dont know what this is. i want them to kith but theyre eleven

End of Fifth—For The First Time

Chapter Summary

Todd's first year at Welton comes to a close.

Chapter Notes

hehe surprise its todds pov for the ending of fifth grade

CW!!// Homophobic themes, homophobic language, internalized homophobia, !!!HOMOPHOBIC SLURS!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Todd Anderson thought that Neil Perry was the best person he'd ever met.

He didn't want to go to Welton. Not even a smidge. But his parents seemed to think that if he spent a couple years at the boarding school he'd live up to Jeffery's legacy eventually. He'd said no time and time again, and he was sure his mind would never change, but then he got dragged along to the yearly Welton Christmas concert. He didn't really pay attention. It was the same old thing. Jeffery being perfect and his parents fawning over him while their non-perfect child slumped lower and lower in the seat next to them. He was always in a bad mood afterward, hearing his parents fill Jeffery's ears with praises and forget that they had even brought Todd along to watch the show. He didn't even follow when his family walked away.

It was his usual routine. Stay in the same corner until his parents remembered they had brought him there and found him to take him home. But when a pair of shoes frightened him and he shot his head up right into the chin of another boy, that routine changed forever. His head hurt, but he could barely focus on it when he looked up at the boy who was standing in front of him. He was looking at Todd. Nobody ever looked at Todd. He figured this boy had just been in the unfortunate position of walking past Todd, but... it actually looked like he'd come there to talk to him.

It felt nice.

Of course that nice feeling was crushed when Jeffery introduced Neil to their parents. Jeffery knew him. When someone knew Jeffery, they rarely ever kept paying attention to Todd. Neil could be friends with

the cool seventh grader rather then the weirdo who had given him an uppercut with his skull. But there was this smile that Neil gave him right before he disappeared back into the halls of Welton... it gave Todd the hope that maybe Neil would choose him instead of Jeffery. That tiny hope was all it took for him to finally succumb to his parent's wishes of him going to Welton.

It wasn't too bad. Jeffery ran off and Todd was hoping he could pretend not to be related to him for at least a little while. His roommate was a nice enough kid. He had this crooked smile and fancy blazer that relaxed Todd. He lucked out with his roommate, he thought. A school full of boys and he got the one who was willing to keep his dirty laundry off the floors just cause not having a clear walking path made Todd anxious. However, Knox Overstreet was also all over the place, and after a short introduction he ran off without even telling Todd where he was going, so Todd just decided to start unpacking.

Then Neil walked in, and Todd knew he had made the right choice. The universe had finally done something for him. His roommate was one of Neil's friends—one of Neil's friends that he needed to return something to, leading Neil right to Todd on his first day at Welton. Todd was shy by nature. He tried his hardest to talk to Neil, but he eventually found out he didn't need to try that hard. Neil was trying enough for the both of them, and suddenly for the first time, Todd felt worthy of trying. When someone like Neil wanted to stick around him, there must've been something good about him.

Everyone liked Neil. Neil was amazing. He read out in English class at a clear, fast pace and he was one of those students no one complained about when they were chosen to read. His smile could lighten a teacher's worst mood. He was always helping people around him. On top of that, Neil was funny and he loved keeping people happy. Todd remembered a time he'd been walking through the hall—he didn't remember the reason—and he turned a corner and saw Neil sitting next to a kid on the floor. It took him a while to realize, but eventually Todd knew what was happening. Neil was comforting the kid, and they didn't even know him. Todd didn't think a person could care that much about other people. He thought it was impossible, but suddenly he hated that he thought that. He wanted to be like that. He wanted to be like Neil.

He looked up to Neil more than he'd ever looked up to anyone. When he was littler—not even in school yet—Jeffery had been the coolest person to him. Being little his parents were required to give him

attention, and that attention made Jeffery pay him attention too. Jeff would explain his schoolwork to Todd, show him his older kid books, and play board games with him in his free time. When Todd got into school too, Jeff got mean. He viewed everything as a competition and it didn't even make any sense to Todd. It wasn't a competition. Even if it was, Jeffery was still first place and Todd was last. He almost celebrated when Jeff got sent off to Welton, but somehow that made it all worse. Jeff wasn't even home, and he was still all his parents talked about. Todd was convinced he'd never look up to someone like that again. But Neil...

Neil was awesome, and Todd somehow *knew* that Neil would never turn on him the way his older brother had. Which is why he was so conflicted when Neil stopped talking to him for a couple of weeks, and when he found out the reason, he wanted to jump off the roof. People had always assumed Todd was a little on the feminine side for as long as he could remember. Even his parents and Jeffery tended to make comments that implied they thought the same thing. He cared a lot at the beginning, being overly anti-gay to make up for it, but then he just gave up. There was nothing he could do to change their mind. He thought that as long as *he* knew what was true, it wouldn't hurt as much to hear that everyone else thought something way worse. However, he didn't expect it to follow him to Welton. He didn't expect Neil to have such a problem with it.

He wasn't flattered that Neil thought *he* was the reason people made those comments about Todd. He wasn't flattered that Neil had started ignoring him to make him seem more... straight or whatever. And he sure wasn't flattered that Neil said it *wouldn't bother him* if Todd actually was gay, because it made the previous two things mean nothing. Neil thought it too. Of course he thought it too. He thought it so much that he stayed away from Todd, but he was too nice to admit it, so he blamed it on himself. Todd never thought he could feel so angry at someone while simultaneously thinking they were so caring. No one thought that stuff about Neil. No one thought a single bad thing about Neil. So it made him angry. What did Neil care if people thought *he* was gay anyway?

When they made up, Todd wanted to shake it off and leave it in the past, but he couldn't help but notice that Neil didn't act the same way he used to. He didn't sneak Todd out of his dorm late at night to do stupid stuff like show him 'better showers.' He didn't help Todd with rhymes when he was writing poetry. He never sat next to Todd on the low chance occurrence that the teacher's let them pick their own partners. When they were hanging out alone in one of their rooms,

Neil sat on the opposite bed when he used to sit close to Todd to annoyingly look over his shoulder and make snide comments about whatever he was doing. Todd got so angry about it he broke his strict journal-code to write angrily about everything he felt. His passage made little to no sense when he reread it, but writing it had made him feel better.

Then Neil did two things. He made up for his broken promise and he held Todd's hand when he was wracked with nervousness at the Christmas concert. Todd really didn't know why he was nervous about that thing anyway. His parents wouldn't be paying him any attention, no one else would be looking at him, so why was he quivering? Why did the thought of standing up there in front of all those people make him wanna curl in on himself and hide from the world? And *why* did that all go away—or at the least made it better—when Neil clutched his hand and didn't let go? Neil was so, so, so... *stupid*.

Neil was stupid. Neil and his stupid smile. Neil and the stupid way he wore his Welton sweater. Neil and his stupid reading glasses that he put on in class when he was called on. Neil was *stupid*. Neil was stupid because he made Todd question himself for the first time in a while. Todd had been *sure*, absolutely *positive,* that he was straight. Girls were pretty. He could perhaps picture himself with a family and wife in the future, but Neil... if Neil thought that he was gay... If Neil was so uncomfortable around him and the way they interacted with one another... maybe he'd been wrong. Maybe it wasn't normal to examine the way your best friend looked and acted every single second of the day. Maybe he didn't just *look up* to Neil. Maybe everyone had been right. Maybe he *was* a faggot.

It was a downer, especially when Neil kept bringing it up.

Somehow, Todd couldn't think about any of that when he was at the debate tournament because Neil was... well, Neil was great. Todd always assumed that Neil wasn't that good at debate because he knew he never actually practiced. They goofed off and made faces at each other through the debate room's window when he was supposed to be practicing, but somehow... Neil did great. He was persuasive, he was clear, he didn't forget a word he was going to say, he never stuttered and Todd saw more and more why everyone was nice to Neil Perry. He wanted to be like that. And surely because he *wasn*'t like that, he dragged Neil down and made him as much of a fag as Todd was. Todd might've been the downer, actually.

But he didn't really bother thinking about it when Neil was sitting

across from his with ice cream smeared on his lips, handing Todd a spoon. Nolan had rewarded the debate team because they had won the tournament, and Neil had snuck his reward out to share it with Todd. When his friend was sticking a spoonful of chocolate ice cream in his face, it was hard to be sad.

"Come on, Toddsie," Neil said, "You're telling me you don't miss ice cream?"

"I miss ice cream," Todd said, "But this is *your* reward. I didn't do anything."

"You kept me from killing myself during debate practice."

"Oh, shut it."

"I'm serious!" Neil insisted and dropped the spoon in his cup so he wouldn't spill it all over Charlie's bed (because he didn't dare eat food on his own bed. Charlie's mattress had plenty of stains anyway). "I don't even like chocolate. I'm not gonna eat this, so just take it!"

"Why did you get it then?" Todd asked defiantly, determined on not accepting this gift. He didn't like it when Neil tried to give him credit for things he didn't deserve credit for.

"For you, idiot," Neil said and picked the spoon back up. "Do you wanna make me sad? Eat the damn ice cream."

Todd opened his mouth and took the spoonful in his mouth and then shoved Neil's arm back at him. It tasted great, but he was trying not to let it show that he was enjoying it. No better way to end the school year than to be force fed ice cream. "I hate you."

"Oh sure you do." Neil waved his hand and shoved his bowl and spoon into Todd's hands, having already eaten all his vanilla. Todd glared at him, but he took the bowl from his friend and began slowly eating the ice cream. "Whatcha gonna do over the summer?"

"I dunno." Todd shrugged. "Probably go to our lake house. My parents take Jeffery into town and I get to sit down alone and listen to morning radio."

"So you do miss morning radio!"

Todd held back a laugh, not wanting to give Neil that satisfaction. "Hey! I didn't say I liked it."

Neil did laugh however. "Where's it at?"

"Richmond."

"Hey, I've got a house up near there."

"Do you?"

"No," Neil said, "We're not rich enough to have a lake house."

"Shut it." Todd punched him in the arm. "We're not rich. My grandparents own it."

"So your grandparents are rich?"

"Seriously, shut it," Todd repeated, "Have I ever told you I freaking hate you?"

"Couple times," Neil smiled, "You've also said the opposite a couple times too."

"Could've been lying," Todd said back, "Maybe I just said it cause you were sad."

"Mm-mm," Neil shook his head, "You looooooove me." Over Spring break, something must've happened to Neil, because he wasn't so shaky around Todd anymore. He let Todd touch him, which sounded incredibly wrong, but for a while Neil cowered whenever Todd laid a hand on him in a way that wasn't a playful punch or slap. He let Todd compliment him without making it all weird, not that Todd complimented him a lot, but a few times Todd had relented that *wow, you're really good that* Neil had flipped. But on the other side, something had happened to Todd over Spring break too. It was like him and Neil had switched that one aspect of their personalities, because now Todd froze at the aspect of Neil accusing him of loving him.

"I don't. I hate you."

"You love me."

"I want to kill you."

"You love me."

"I will literally shank you."

"Vicious," Neil said and leaned back. "And I even gave you ice cream."

"*Forced* ice cream into my hands."

"Hey, I could be forcing you to do a lot worse."

"Neil, what does that even mean?"

"I don't know, but I don't like what you're implying."

"How was I implying *anything*?"

"Oh it doesn't matter just eat your ice cream," Neil said and then played with his fingers. "You're coming back to Welton next year, right?"

Todd looked at him. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Neil shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe this year made you change your mind or something."

"Are *you* coming back to Welton next year?"

Neil gave him a weird look. "Yeah?"

"Then I'm coming back," Todd said simply and put another spoonful of ice cream into his mouth. He never usually regretted saying things like that to Neil. He loved saying things like that to Neil, but seconds later he felt himself heat up at the thought that he had actually said those words out loud. Neil already thought he was gay enough, and clearly Neil *wasn't* okay with it no matter what he said. No matter how straight Todd told him that he was. Todd didn't think he was straight at all when he was looking at Neil's *stupid stupid* smile that he always got when Todd complimented him. It was a different smile from when anyone else complimented him, and Todd couldn't help but feel his heart pang when he first realized there was a difference. But he would never allow himself to think about Neil like that. And he would *never* allow himself to *like* Neil like that.

"Good," Neil said and stuck his finger into Todd's ice cream, then he swiped it on his nose and Todd felt the cold spot on his face. "Because who else am I gonna annoy if you left me?"

Todd pulled up his sleeve and rubbed the ice cream off of his nose. Neil really liked messing with his nose. It was adorable. "You're dumb," He told Neil and rubbed the new wet spot on his sleeve on the

knee of Neil's pants.

"Come on!" Neil said, "You're gonna make it look like I peed myself."

"Good. And I hope everyone laughs at you."

Neil glared. "Maybe you do actually hate me."

Chapter End Notes

haha did anyone ask for chILDHOOD BEST FRIENDS HAVE LONG LASTING CRUSH CLICHE? no no you did not but there you go anyway

Sixth—Da Vinci or Van Gogh?

Chapter Summary

Neil's ecstatic to be back at Welton and finally treat Todd like a friend, but something seems up.

Chapter Notes

CW// minor internalized homophobia!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil definitely didn't know what he hated more: tons of schoolwork at Welton or spending the summers with his father. That summer had been even worse than the last. They had gone over, in detail, each of Neil's semester grades and how much work he would have to put in in the future to keep himself on the right path. Somehow, talking about the schoolwork was almost worse than actually having to do it. In a way, Neil liked having something to do all the time, having a schedule... It made him feel like he was organized, but he did not like being evaluated over everything he did. He never would, because he never felt like he was good enough to be evaluated, let alone get a good score from that evaluation.

In short, Neil Perry got a little sadder every summer, but it made seeing his friends every first day of school even better.

Oddly, the first person he saw was Knox, and he didn't exactly *see* him as much as he just felt him jump on his back. He almost collapsed, but he managed to straighten himself before they both crashed to the nasty Welton floors. When he did, Knox had situated himself for a nice piggy-back ride to his dorm. Neil let it happen. Knox wasn't getting off of him no matter what, so he might as well have done this the easy way. "What? Being pulled around in carriages all summer wasn't enough?"

"Shut up." Knox bonked him on the head. "You make me sound so... *ew*."

"I think you *are* so ew," Neil responded, but before Knox could hit him again, Neil jumped and made Knox cling harder to his shoulders. Then, continuing the putting off of Knox's eventual revenge, he broke into a sprint down the dorms hallway until he reached Knox and Todd's new room. He threw Knox in and then was immediately

jumped on top of. They thrashed around on the floor until they heard the door open. Momentarily they stopped and looked up, but when they saw it was just Charlie, they began to punch on another again.

"Hey, hey, hey!" Charlie said, "Without me?"

"Shut up." Neil shoved Knox by the face off of him and finally stood back up, deciding that he had won the fight and Knox was stupid. He straightened his blazer, poking himself on the two new pins that adorned the collar. He'd gotten one for being MVP of the debate team (only the lord knows how) and another for being on the honor roll for both fourth and fifth grade. "How was your summer?"

"A horror," Charlie responded.

"God," Knox complained and finally got off the floor. "Do you *ever* have a good summer?"

"Without you Knoxy how could I?"

"If you don't shut up—"

"What are you gonna do? Jump on me?" Charlie taunted and then gestured from his feet to his head. "Good luck. I grew like another two inches over the summer. I'd crush you."

"Not if I do it in your sleep," Knox mumbled.

"What?" Charlie asked.

"What?" Knox responded.

Neil rolled his eyes. "You two are so stupid. I think you guys should just be roommates."

"As *if*," Charlie accentuated with an even more dramatic eye roll. Right as Knox was about to throw his suitcase on his bed, Charlie flopped down stomach-first on it, and Neil saw a debate in Knox's face of whether or not he wanted to continue throwing the suitcase, perhaps giving Charlie a concussion, which wouldn't have been the worst thing. "Nolan would never allow it."

"Maybe if you stopped being so annoying..." Knox suggested while shoving Charlie over so he could actually put his suitcase down and start unpacking.

"*Knoxy*," Charlie said dramatically, "You ask too much of me."

Neil sat down on Todd's bed while Knox and Charlie fell into *their* regular routine, bickering like a married couple while simultaneously insulting each other like brothers. Neil fell into the familiarity of it, letting himself smile for the first time in a couple of months. The deafening sound of their shrill screams was more comforting than the deafening sound of the silence in his home. He was lost in the world for a lot of moments, tuning in temporarily to hear Charlie and Knox arguing on whether or not Nolan would look good in a dress, and then Neil decided he was better off staring into the void.

He didn't know what he was thinking about entirely, but he knew it had something to do with Todd. Something to do with Todd and how much of a *dick* Neil had been to him last year. Sure, it had ended with him smearing ice cream all over Todd's face, but there was still an awkwardness in the air. Neil half-expected Todd to come in and end their friendship because he had come to a self-realization over the summer that he deserved better than Neil. Neil knew that, but Todd hadn't come to that realization yet, and Neil knew one day he was going to, so he was trying to keep himself prepared. It made him sad, though, and he was supposed to be happy, so he tried to stop thinking about it.

But he really couldn't stop thinking about Todd. The summer had been even more of a drip when Neil thought about how he could've been spending time with him. He even calculated how long it would take him to walk to Richmond just to see Todd, and it didn't seem too impossible, but then he added in the factor of possibly being kidnapped as an eleven-year-old boy walking alone on the side of the road, and he decided against it. He was able to keep himself satisfied with the mental image of Todd and just the reminder that he existed. At the beginning of the summer, he thought that was weird, but by the last day of summer, he'd made the important development of realizing it was just his coping mechanism. It wasn't *gay* to have a coping mechanism. Some people bit their nails, some people played piano, Neil thought about his best friend. It made perfect enough sense.

He was picturing Todd's stupid smile in his mind when he realized that Todd was actually standing in front of him now, snapping his fingers in Neil's face just like his brother liked to do. Neil blinked and brought himself back to reality, finally seeing that stupid smile in person for the first time in a couple months. He mimicked the smile and noticed over Todd's shoulder that Knox and Charlie had disappeared. Based on the missing items of clothing from Knox's suitcase, Neil figured they were doing *whatever* it was they did when

they tied shirts around their heads. Todd started snapping again. "Hey, weirdo, can I put my suitcase down?"

"What if I said no?"

"Then I'd have to use force," Todd said simply, "And I don't feel like it right now, so please?"

"You don't feel like hurting me?" Neil asked and then stood up, dramatically placing his hands on Todd's shoulders. "What have you done with Todd?"

Todd laughed and shoved Neil away from his bed. "Shut up, stupid."

"Weirdo and stupid in the first few seconds, maybe you are still my Todd."

Todd paused for a second and then put his suitcase on his bed, only responding with, "Yeah."

Neil furrowed his eyebrows, but he didn't want to say anything about how Todd was clearly upset. "So, you wanna know how long it would *hypothetically* take for me to walk from my house to Richmond?"

"No, but I wanna know why you know that."

"It's not important."

"Feels like it might be."

"You're annoying," Neil said, and then started helping Todd unpack his suitcase.

"*You're* annoying," Todd said back.

"Hey," Neil said and moved some clothes aside to reveal the bottom of Todd's suitcase. There was a record. "What's that?" Neil reached for it but got his hand slapped. He reeled back and looked at Todd with a stupidly offended look. "What was that for!?"

"For touching my stuff," Todd said quickly and shoved his clothes back over the record, zipping up his suitcase and now allowing Neil to touch it again. They stood in silence for a few moments and it didn't feel nice. Neil always noted that silence with Todd *always* felt nice, but this time it didn't. He didn't know what was going on, but he hated that it was happening right then. Right when he had finally gotten over his *whatever* problem he had been dealing with. "What?"

Neil snapped back into it *again*. He looked up at Todd. "What?"

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like—Like—I don't know, but stop it."

"Todd, how am I looking at you?"

"I don't know, but it's weird."

"Sorry," Neil apologized, even though he had absolutely no idea what kind of 'look' Todd was referring to, but he kind of just took it as Todd being offended for Neil looking at him in anyway at all. "I just missed you."

Todd froze for another second and Neil saw his mouth open and close multiple times before he finally said, "You too."

"Is everything alright?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"Because... you're acting like me."

Todd side-eyed him. "What's *that* mean?"

"Like... you know," Neil said and gave Todd a moment to think about what it meant. Clearly that moment wasn't enough, but Neil still didn't know how to explain it, so he went about demonstrating what he meant by *showing* it to Todd. "I know how long it takes to walk to Richmond because I figured it out cause I wanted to see you."

"Really?" Todd's weird mood faded for a second, but then he shook his head shortly and looked anywhere but Neil. "You're ridiculous."

"I was lonely!" Neil complained, "And who knows where Charlie goes during the summer? I could never calculate how to get to him, being around Knox would make me feel poor, and god knows Pitts and Meeks are probably attached at the hip in their secret laboratory during the summer."

"And Cameron?" Todd pressured.

"What *about* Cameron?" Neil rebutted, "Do I not spend enough alone time with him *here*?"

"Don't you spend enough alone time with me?"

"There is *never* enough alone time with you."

"Shut up," Todd said again and Neil saw the tips of his cheeks turning a very light red. "You sound like Charlie."

"Oh god," Neil said in a over dramatic display of disgust. He put a hand to his stomach and gagged. "I'm so sorry." It made Todd laugh, and then everything felt better again, so Neil decided to drop whatever he had been on about before. If Todd wanted to act like Neil had last year for a little bit, then Neil really couldn't judge him. Neil was the *last* person who deserved to judge him, but he felt an urge to apologize to him more than judge him, anyway. Because this hurt. Is *this* how Todd had felt when Neil was doing it to him? Neil didn't even know what *it* was, but it was painful. Todd and him had a very specific way of caring about one another, and when one didn't reciprocate it... well, Neil didn't realize how much it hurt. Now he did. He wanted to drop to his knees and beg for forgiveness for when he'd done it, but Todd would've never allowed it.

Todd unzipped the first pocket of his luggage and pulled out a stack of books. Neil only recognized one of them, and that was Todd's journal, and it made him excited. A whole new stack of books for him and Todd to read. He didn't like reading that much, but he liked reading with Todd. He liked reading to Todd. He liked being read to by Todd. And you know what? There was nothing weird about it. It was just how they hung out, and Neil was proud of himself. Of course, he was ashamed that he was proud of himself for being able to react normally to a normal friendship, but he couldn't help it. It'd been *bad* last year. He would sit next to Todd at dinner and wonder if it was coming off wrong. His mind had been swarmed with those awful thoughts, and it felt freeing to not be held down by it anymore and to just enjoy their time together.

Neil sat down on Knox's bed and leaned back on his hands. "Dracula or Frankenstein's monster?"

"Dracula," Todd said, "You know that."

"I'm making sure I didn't lose ya over the summer," Neil said and then considered for a moment. "Drive-in movie or at-home movie night?"

"At home," Todd answered.

"Presley or Sinatra?"

"Sinatra."

"You *are* still my Todd."

"Yeah, not sure you're still Neil though."

"Oh, come on, try me."

Todd turned around and sat on his own bed, staring across the room at Neil. "Okay.. *Singin' in the Rain* or *Bye Bye Birdie*?"

"Bye Bye Birdie."

"Edgar Allan Poe or Shakespeare?"

"Shakespeare," Neil shivered, "You *know* how I feel about Edgar Allan Poe."

Todd laughed at him. "I hope we read The Cask of Amontillado this year."

"Well, what's that you creep?"

"You'll find out," Todd said mysteriously, "You know the circumstances around his death are actually quite suspicious. I was reading a book about it when I was in Richmond, so you probably wouldn't have had a good time if you'd walked up."

"I would hope if I had you would've dropped the book for me."

"Mm, I don't know, the circumstances are quite suspicious."

"Okay, fine then... Da Vinci or Van Gogh?"

"Da Vinci."

"You serious?" Neil stood up, "Not Van Gogh? You know he had a suspicious death too right?"

"Didn't he just kill himself?"

"No, that's morbid."

"We *are* talking about the guy who cut off his own ear, right?"

"Okay, you, me, dark English classroom tonight," Neil said, "We're going over *both* of these suspicious deaths."

Todd squinted. "You don't read. How do you know about Van Gogh?"

Neil looked incredibly offended, but he couldn't exactly say Todd was wrong. "It was on a radio show I was listening to."

"You are my Neil." Todd smiled. "You and your radio shows."

"I have *a lot* to show you."

Chapter End Notes

i love my boys
what is aplot
i do not kno wwhat a plot is

Sixth—Ridiculous

Chapter Summary

Neil was just looking for Todd when he overhears something.

Chapter Notes

CW// Homophobic slur, internalized homophobia, overt homophobia
this chapter is a l o t o f dialogue

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil loved the sound of dice rolling around inside a cup. It was a calm kind of clatter. Not the kind of irritating clatter when you were washing dishes or the classy clatter of touching wine glasses, but just calm. The more dice the better. That's why Yahtzee was one of his favorite games. The entire point of it was to roll dice around in a cup and then hear them land on the ground. Neil listened to the sounds like they were the morning radio. He was so wrapped up in it he almost didn't notice Charlie cheating. Almost. Charlie was writing a Yahtzee onto his score sheet. Neil snatched the pencil.

"Not a Yahtzee," He said and handed the pencil over to Meeks, who was already giving Charlie a disapproving glare.

"What do you mean not a Yahtzee? Are you blind?" Charlie retaliated and gestured down to the dice in the middle of them. Only him, Neil, Meeks, and Pitts were playing. Todd nor Knox were a fan of board games, so they had opted to go study for a history test with Cameron, so they must've really hated board games. When Neil asked Knox about it, Knox tried to say that they didn't dislike Cameron *that* much, and while he didn't believe it, he was glad they were trying. Charlie was past trying with Cameron, and Neil almost was too, but he also thought that Cameron didn't deserve to be completely alone. So what he'd said some mean stuff to Neil? Nothing different to what his dad, mom, or anyone else would say.

Pitts looked down in the middle. "There are six dice."

"What?" Charlie asked quickly and looked down at the floor as well. He frantically reached out and grabbed one of the die, shoving it up his shirt sleeve. "No, there's not."

"You left a six with the four other three's, idiot," Neil said and grabbed Charlie's coat, pulling it off of him and searching it for more illegal contraband. There was only the one die, so he took it and tossed the coat right back at Charlie's face. "Have you been sneaking this in for all your Yahtzee's?"

"No." Charlie pulled the coat off of his face and threw it behind him to a place that didn't matter. "Only when it's four out of five. I only had one."

Meeks pushed up his glasses with a deep sigh, and it wasn't even a disappointed sigh for Charlie. "This is on us, guys. How did we not notice that?"

"I thought the dice were going to roll too far and he was just grabbing them!" Pitts defended.

"Really, Pitts?"

"Sorry that I assume the best in our friends."

"It's *Charlie*."

"Hey," Charlie said, "You're not wrong, but—hey!" Charlie shouted as Neil took his scorecard and ripped it in half with a pointed glare. He did not tolerate cheaters. Not in games at least. During a test or something like that he probably encouraged cheating more than he discouraged it, but in games, he was the cheating police. Once when he was six, his father tried to sneak an a hundred out of the bank in monopoly and Neil made his character *lose* two-hundred dollars every time he passed GO. That was the one time Neil had beat out his father, and he thought about it a lot.

"You upset Officer Perry," Meeks said simply and crossed his arms. Meeks was nearly as bad as Neil was, but he was way more subtle. Meeks went for the self-esteem and hurt you with words. He was really good at gaslighting, which Neil didn't usually admire as a good quality in a friend, but when it was a punishment for cheating, it was pretty good. Meeks had once convinced Charlie that he had cheated when he actually hadn't, convincing him to stand in a corner for two minutes, but it didn't work again once Charlie figured out that Meeks was lying. Instead, Meeks had ended up in the corner for *five* minutes.

For a group of young boys, their punishments for each other were pretty juvenile, and it wasn't even because they liked each other too much or something. Regular things that might've been considered

punishments, like pushing them into a lake or making them shower in cold water with their clothes on, were things they did to each other on a daily basis, so it was hard to find a fitting punishment. But it did really piss of the eleven-year-olds to sit in a corner and stare at the wall when they were trying to prove they were mature, so at the least they had that.

So now Charlie was in the corner and Neil, Meeks, and Pitts were continuing a legal game of Yahtzee. Pitts ended up winning, and he was the one who got to decide if Charlie should've been released from the corner yet. Because it was Pitts and he had a heart of gold, he let Charlie out and the first thing Charlie did to thank his friend for freeing him was jump on him. Pitts had pointed out the six dice after all. Neil and Meeks jumped up to pull Charlie off of Pitts, who they usually left out of their roughhousing despite the fact he could probably K.O. any one of them, and ended up in a tussle on the ground.

"Meeks!" Pitts shouted, "Careful of the cabinet!" He tried to keep it in a hushed tone, but it was urgent. The boys were very close to tornado-ing right into the large wardrobe, and Pitts couldn't stop that with a whisper. Meeks heard and had a sudden rush of strength, picking them all up off the floor and ushering them away from the wardrobe. Once Charlie was up, Neil immediately saw the suspicious look on his face.

Charlie walked up to Pitts. "What's in there?"

"Nothing," Pitts said.

"So you just care about the antique furniture?"

"I might."

Unfortunately when it came down to it, Neil was on Charlie's side, and while he bickered with the roommates about what was hidden in the cabinet, Neil snuck over, opened it, and pulled down a device from the top shelf. He had no idea what it was, and he honestly didn't expect himself *to* know what it was, but he thought he would at the least have a vague idea. He did not. There were too many wires for his brain to process. "Charlie, I couldn't even tell you what this is."

Meeks looked over his shoulder and squealed. "Neil!"

"Something wro—whoa!" Neil's snarky remark was interrupted by Meeks tackling him and taking the device, immediately passing it over

to Pitts who simply stood in the corner of his bed and held it high above his head. He was too tall for any of them to try and reach for it. Neil pushed Meeks off of him. "What is it you weirdos?"

"It's nothing!" Meeks fell back on top of Neil and covered his mouth to prevent any more questions, but he did not account for Charlie, and that was a very dangerous thing to do.

Charlie pulled him off of Neil. "Then why you hiding it?"

"Cause you guys break things!" Pitts shouted from the bed, pointing down at the Chaos Brothers, who had gotten that name for a reason after all. "A lot!"

"Hey!" Charlie whipped around and pointed back. "That was an accident!"

"You were an accident!"

"What is *going on*?" All four of them looked over to see Knox standing in the doorway, looking extremely concerned. It was nothing new to see the boys at each other's throats, but when you weren't involved, the casualness was forgotten and replaced completely with worry. One of them could throat punch another, walk into a room to see one of their friends doing the same thing, and still be disturbed. "I thought you guys were playing Yahtzee."

"Yeah, we *were*," Meeks said accusingly, "But then Cheater McCheaterson decided to be dishonest."

"I'll *show you* dishonest." Charlie tried to storm over, but was held back by Knox's glare. Knox was also not a fan of cheating, but it was mostly for real-life situations. He thought honesty was the best policy, and he'd tried to teach Charlie that multiple times. It had never gone well, but he still acted surprised when he found out that Charlie was cheating. "What, Knoxious? It's *Yahtzee* not the presidential election!"

"Yahtzee is gateway cheating!" Knox said.

"All these virtuous souls for friends and you're still a scumbag," Neil said sarcastically.

"You shut up," Charlie responded, "I'll kill you in your sleep."

"Gud' luck." Neil saw Pitts slyly pass the machine back to Meeks, who slid it into his desk drawer without any of the other boys noticing.

Neil decided to let it slide. He'd done enough fighting for that hour. He needed to save his energy to beat Charlie and Todd to the showers before dinner. None of the shower heads were better than the others, but Neil had a specific one he liked to use, and since his friends were *jerks* they always tried to steal it from him because it was funny to watch his face go red. Neil was reminded he hadn't seen Todd for most of that Sunday, and he had the urge to go find his friend. "Knox, take my place."

"What?" Knox asked, "I don't like—Neil!" Too bad for Knox that Neil was already half-way out the door before he'd even started talking. Neil wasn't sure where Todd was, maybe he could've asked Knox before burning that bridge, but he decided to start with the most obvious places first. Todd's room, Neil's room, Cameron's room, the community room, even the bathrooms, but Todd was nowhere to be found. Eventually Neil found himself in the high school hallways. He didn't go there often, only to pick up cigarettes when he had signed up for hiding them, and it was because it was *scary* in there. Most of the boys were nice, the thing that scared Neil was seeing all the homework they were doing. It sounded so stupid, but Neil feared having that much homework to do, because he knew he would do it. He would spend all his time doing it. He shook this thought from his head as he continued down the hall, not exactly sure where he was going anymore.

"Hey, Perry." Neil was stopped in the hallway by an older boy he was familiar with. He had gotten the sparklers for Neil in fourth grade. The boy was already holding contraband, but this time round it was a buncha' rolled up pieces of paper. "Still doing your favor exchange?"

"Always," Neil responded. Most of the time it was the high schoolers who approached the younger kids and then they just cashed in their favors at a later date. Charlie had written up a whole contract for it and everything so the older boys couldn't go back on their own word. "But what is that?"

"Coupla' joints," The older boy said and held one of the rolled up papers right between their faces. "Nothing you should be gettin' into. Not yet at least, but I'm somehow already on Hager's radar."

"Somehow," Neil repeated.

"Okay, yeah," The older boy said, "Either way, I know I'm gettin' checked, just don't know when. So can you hold onto these for a while?"

"A while?" Neil asked, catching a whiff of the objects in the boy's hands. "They stink. What if I get caught?"

"You won't. Take some of the soap from the upstairs bathrooms and put it on your wall or something. It's strong. Would cover up the scent," The boy explained, "And on top of whatever random chore you make me do, I'll give ya one."

"You said I shouldn't be getting into it."

"I also said not *yet,"* The boy repeated, "When you hit high school you should smoke your first joint."

"Is that gonna last that long?"

"Sure, why not?" Then the joints were shoved in Neil's hands and he slid them into his pants pocket. His initial mission of finding Todd had floated back into his mind once the older boy disappeared, and he decided that he wasn't going to find Todd there, so he turned around to begin walking out, but then he heard Jeffery's voice. Out of all the likely people who knew where Todd might've been, Jeffery was low on the list, but Neil was running out of options and it couldn't have hurt to at least check. He turned around again and headed back down the hall, following the sound of Jeffery's voice and almost regretting it. He sounded angry, and angry would be a bad way for Jeffery Anderson to start the year.

Neil poked his head around the door frame to see if Jeffery's room was safe to enter and saw that it most decidedly was not. He also saw that maybe he should've checked there first because Todd was there, standing across from his brother. They were yelling at each other, and Neil wanted to know why they were doing this with the door open. He could hear them down the hall after all. As if they knew he was there and were reading his thoughts, Todd shouted at Jeffery to close the door. Of course, this didn't prompt Neil to leave. Like Hell he was going to leave Todd there to get yelled at. He pressed his ear up against the door to hear the muffled argument.

"Oh my—what does it matter, Todd?" Jeffery groaned, "You wouldn't have come anyway."

"Just cause I wouldn't have *come* doesn't mean I didn't deserve to *know,*" Todd complained, "And I would've come!"

"You don't even care about her!" Jeffery yelled, "You get pissed off every time she takes me and not you."

"Yeah, cause I wonder why that would possibly upset me!"

Somehow, Neil could understand a little of what they were talking about. There weren't many 'she's' in Todd's family that Neil knew about except his aunt, and what Todd had told him about that aunt kind of matched what the brothers seemed to be arguing about. His aunt was an Amelia Earhart of sorts. She wasn't a pilot, but she traveled the world a lot. Every time she visited Todd's family, she would always take the boys on an adventure through whatever state she chose to. Todd had only told him all this because Neil had asked more about the lake house in Richmond, apparently she stayed there with them the whole summer. He seemed upset about it, so Neil asked if she was mean, and the answer he got was basically a yes. When Todd was eight, she stopped taking him on the adventures.

"It's cause of the money, Todd. Mom told you, but you never listen."

"No, *you* never listen. I listen plenty. I listen to the whole family talk about my *amazing* brother who gets rewarded with his *amazing* trips with his *amazing* aunt."

"Todd—"

"No, shut up! You think they even care if I *actually* know what's going on? They have dinner with anyone whose ear they can talk off about you, and that's always the story they tell. 'Jeff goes on trips with his aunt because he's such a good boy.' I don't exist during those dinners!"

"But you shouldn't listen to that, you should listen to what mom tells you."

"Anything she says that isn't about you means nothing to me!" Todd screamed, "Because it is *always* a lie! *Always*!"

"You are being so ridiculous," Jeffery responded angrily, "You need to stop this whole victim complex thing. They care just as much about you as they do me. It's not my fault that you're just stupid."

"What?" Todd asked, "I'm not—what?"

"Come on, Todd. You just think like this cause' you're insecure that I'm everything you want to be."

"Do you *hear* yourself right now? You're so—" Todd groaned out and Neil had never heard him so angry or so loud. He thought it was impossible for Todd to be like that. "You're so, so full of yourself! I

don't even know how Aunt Ness can even *deal* with hanging out with you all the time. The trips have probably just been her building up her tolerance of you so she doesn't kill you at family reunions."

"If she's building up *tolerance* for anyone, it's you, Todd."

"Oh, and what's so annoying about *me*?"

"Come on, Todd," Jeffery's voice lowered and Neil could barely hear it anymore. "You know how strict a Catholic she is."

Todd did not match his energy. "What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"Come on," Jeffery repeated, "I'm trying to be on your side here, man. You're my brother and I love you no matter how much of an idiot you can be. You *know* she doesn't—she's not—... the whole... *thing*... you know?"

"No, I don't know," Todd said plainly, "What thing, Jeff?"

"Come on." Neil could've been drunk if he took a shot every time Jeffery said 'come on.' "You know what I'm talking about, and you know I don't really care."

"I have *no idea* what you're talking about," Todd responded, but Neil could hear it in his voice. He knew exactly what Jeffery was saying. Neil knew it too, and he hadn't taken what Todd had said to him last year as serious as he did right then. Neil had been convinced, really convinced, that everyone thought Todd was a... because of *him*. Todd had told him that wasn't it at all, that people had just *always* thought that about him. Neil didn't believe it. Neil didn't believe it until his cheek was pressed against a wood door, definitely getting a splinter, and he was hearing his best friend's brother tell him that his family didn't like him because of what they thought. "There's nothing wrong with me."

"It's not particularly *normal*—"

"No," Todd agreed, "That's why there's nothing wrong with me."

"You don't gotta lie to me Todd."

"I'm not lying."

"Come on," Jeffery said again, "I mean... Harry from first grade?"

"Maybe *he* was a fag, but I wasn't," Todd insisted, "And I'm not now."

Neil wasn't sure who sounded more like a bigot out of the Anderson brothers, but he was sure he never thought anything like that would come out of Todd's mouth. He thought it was a mutual understanding between them that being... well, that being gay was fine, but apparently not. Not that Neil could blame him. He'd probably react the same if he was being told his aunt left him out because he was a fairy.

"And Neil?"

Neil could *feel* Todd freeze because he froze too. Subconsciously, he pressed his ear closer. He heard no sounds, no breathing, no anything for a couple of seconds. "What *about* Neil?"

"You two are close."

"Yeah, he's my friend."

"And...?"

"And *what*, Jeff?" Todd said angrily, "Neil and I aren't—*ugh*!"

"I know Neil's not a fag," Jeffery said, "And I get that might upset you —"

"You *what*?"

"You know, if he doesn't like you back, but—"

"You're saying you think *Neil* isn't, but that *I* am?" Todd asked, "You don't—You don't even *know* Neil! You've spent your whole life with me and you... how many times are you gonna make me mad today?"

"You're getting all busted up over nothing."

"Over nothing?" Todd asked, "You didn't tell me my aunt was in the hospital, went to visit her without me, and now you're sitting here calling me names and accusing me of having a crush on a *boy*."

"Neil's not a bad choice."

"Do you *ever* hear yourself?" Todd asked, mostly himself. "I have never —I *will* never have that kind of feeling towards Neil. Toward any *boy*."

"Whatever, Todd," Jeffery said, "Even if you're not gay, you're sure a drama queen."

"I hate you."

"Okay, Todd."

"I'm serious. I hate you!"

"We'll see how you feel at family dinner next Sunday."

"Oh, am I actually invited to that?"

"Just get out of my room."

Neil didn't have time to move before Todd opened the door and they were face-to-face. Todd's face was red from anger, but all of that drained the second he saw Neil standing outside the door. He shut it behind him quickly and looked away. "How much did you hear?"

"A good bit," Neil answered, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean tuh. I was just looking for you."

"Do you need something?"

"No, I just hadn't seen you all day," Neil said, "Wanted to hang out... if that's alright."

"Why wouldn't it be alright?"

"I mean, if you don't want to be friends anymore cause of the stuff your brother is saying..."

"He's an idiot," Todd said, "You know I don't like you... like *that*, right?"

"Yeah, I know." *Who would?*

"And I'm not..."

"I know," Neil said again

Todd sighed. "And you're not lyin'?"

"Why would I be?"

"People like lying to me."

"I'd never lie to you."

"But you thought it too, right?"

"What?"

"That I was?"

"No," Neil shook his head, "Never. Never in a mean way."

"In *what* way then, Neil?"

"In no way."

"You said you wouldn't lie to me."

"Fine! But it's weird..." Neil looked around them and then dragged Todd out of the hallway and finally got to a place where they weren't surrounded by teenagers. "Just for a little for that weird time last year... I dunno, I kinda *hoped* you were?"

Todd blinked. "Hoped?"

"Yeah, cause then... it wouldn't of been my fault ...that Cam said that stuff bout' you... it would just *be* you."

"And that makes it better?"

"No! No it doesn't. Ah jeez."

"I feel like you're still lying."

"I—" Neil stopped himself. Those thoughts that he'd had last year, he wanted to repress them all. They'd get him killed. "I don't know what it was, honest. Just that, you know, *if* I was, which I'm not, I'd probably like you, and then if *you* weren't... I don't know."

"You mentally rejected yourself in a hypothetical world?" Todd asked.

"I guess so?"

"You're so..." Todd trailed off and Neil saw a smile creeping onto his face. He was glad to see that Todd was still able to smile, let alone at him after what he'd just said. "Ridiculous."

"I might be," Neil agreed.

Chapter End Notes

i dont know

Sixth—The Homosexual Voice of Reason

Chapter Summary

> Charlie thinks a game of spin the bottle between him and all his friends will be fun.

Chapter Notes

> CW// Implied homophobia and minor homophobic slur
> but mostly a bunch of dorks getting their first kisses over with

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If anyone ever thought they knew what was going on in Charlie Dalton's brain, Neil Perry would tell them to think again. There'd been plenty of times he'd thought he finally figured Charlie out, and none of those times had ended well. It was almost like he purposefully tried to throw people off, but it was really because Charlie Dalton was truly off his rocker. Who knew why he said the things he did or how he came up with the ideas he had? Neil wanted to know, so he could have a long talk with whatever had made Charlie this way. He had a few complaints and improvements.

Complaint number one: why would a game of *spin the bottle* ever occur in Charlie's mind at an all-boys boarding school. Further, why would he ever try to follow through with such a game? Why would he gather all his friends in his room, make them sit on the floor, and then set an empty root beer bottle in the middle of them? Neil wished he knew. Maybe if he knew he could've gotten himself out of it.

Complaint number two: why, if he was so insistent on this thing, would he invite Richard Cameron? Someone who, once he figured out what was going on, would write a detailed report and turn it into the mayor instead of the principal. Charlie barely included Cameron in their regular activities, let alone something like this. Neil wished desperately that he could uncover Charlie's motivations, but he knew it was impossible. It was likely he didn't even have motivations and he was truly, truly just insane, which would not surprise Neil.

Neil caught on a lot quicker than the other boys did because he knew his roommate. He knew how his brain worked. And for the first time during his schooling at Welton, he begged that hopefully the next year he would be roommates with Todd. According to Knox, Todd was a

heavenly roommate. He wouldn't have minded Pitts either, but not like he'd ever try to step between Meeks and Pitts' friendship, that wouldn't end super well, and he knew how often their rooms got searched for the illegal inventions the staff knew they were building. Neil wouldn't be able to exchange any favors then.

He sat next to the two people he least wanted to kiss: Todd and Cameron. In his mind, it was less likely to land on either one of his sides than in front of him or diagonal of him. He hated thinking like this, but if he had to kiss *any* one of his friends it would be... well, it would be Todd, probably, but not since his conversation with his brother. Even then, Neil didn't think he wanted to kiss Todd anyway. He liked being Todd's friend and that was enough for him. He shook his head when he realized that it didn't matter anyway because he wasn't physically able to be attracted to Todd. So, if he had to kiss any one of his friends, it would be Charlie... or Knox. It would be Charlie or Knox.

Knox wouldn't make it weird and he would definitely never talk about it again while simultaneously not pretending that it never happened. Knox was good with awkward things like that, another reason why Neil thought it was so easy to be his friend. Also, if there were any rules or guidelines that they had to follow, Knox would either make sure they stuck to them or gain them some leeway depending on the rules. If it was supposed to be a second long and someone tried to make them kiss longer Knox would say *you said one second* and if it was ten seconds, Knox would say *but I have a mouth sore and that's gonna hurt*. Neil loved Knox... enough to want to kiss him apparently.

He didn't know at all why he wouldn't mind kissing Charlie either, but it just seemed like the natural order of things. They lived in each other's mess and saw one another almost every second of every day. Charlie had given Neil a book about a man who kidnaps a child he is sexually attracted to (*yeah*, Neil finally read Lolita, and let's just say it wasn't going to be something he recommended to Todd), so there was no real way to make it uncomfortable between them. For god's sake, Charlie had *washed Neil down* when he had a gaping wound in his back, and that was way more sensual than kissing. He shivered at his own thoughts and tried to remind himself that it wasn't that he *didn't mind* kissing them, it was that if he absolutely *had* to, he would hate kissing Charlie and Knox the least.

"What's happening?" Pitts asked as Charlie smirked. The rest of the group was still staring at the bottle, not having figured out what was going on yet. It was almost surprising to Neil. They knew Charlie too,

right? He was weird, he did weird things, their minds should've already jumped to the worst. Pitts made eye contact with Charlie and gulped. "I'm scared."

"Don't be, Pittsie," Charlie soothed, "This is all in good fun."

"...are you going to explain?" Todd asked quietly. He still wasn't used to hanging out with them all at once. If it was just him. Neil, Knox, and Charlie he was fine, but he was still adapting to all of them. He still didn't really know Meeks or Pitts, granted *those* two kind of just spent all their free time with one another, and all he knew about Cameron was that he was annoying and stuck-up, which wasn't exactly the best incentive to want to keep getting to know him. Neil could've punched Charlie for putting Todd in a situation like this. A large group of boys kissing each other... sounded like Todd's worst nightmare.

Neil didn't like implying that Todd's worst nightmare was something close to an orgy, but when you thought about it subjectively it made sense.

"Maybe," Charlie shrugged, "Or maybe Neil can."

Neil looked over at him. "You really want me to kill you, don't you?"

"If that were the case, I would do something way worse."

Unfortunately Neil knew that was true, so he was further away from ever possibly understanding why Charlie would want to do this. He shook his head. "Give me one good reason I shouldn't lead them all out the fire escape right now, Dalton."

Charlie seriously considered an answer for a moment and then responded with, "Practice?"

"*Practice*?" Neil echoed, "Are you for real?"

"Well, where else are you going to get practice?" Charlie asked, "Don't you want to be a player in college?"

"No, I don't," Neil answered, "That's *you*."

"Okay, still," Charlie said, "You want to finally meet the girl of your dreams and then have no idea what to do?"

"Do I want to meet the girl of my dreams and explain to her *how* I

have any idea what to do?"

"Lie to her and say you went to public school."

"Charlie, I'm seeing a lot of holes."

"Oh..." Meeks suddenly said, and then turned to Charlie with a disgusted look. "*Oh*." One by one all the boys slowly started realizing what was going on, and each reaction of disgust was different. Neil was sure the majority of the displeasure wasn't at the fact they were all male, but because they were all *friends*. He couldn't say the same for Cameron, who was clutching the cross on his necklace like he was going to need to perform an exorcism soon.

Neil didn't know how Charlie did it, but somehow he convinced all of them to at least do *one* round. Even Cameron. Everyone had to spin at least once and then it would be over and none of them would ever bring it up ever again. Charlie said that this probably wasn't a rare occurrence at all-boys boarding schools and assured them this was a part of their maturing process. After all, boys did weird things together when they were younger. This was just one of those things. Granted the *things* those groups did probably weren't as arranged and set up as this was, but Charlie failed to make that comparison.

Charlie clapped. "Who wants to start?"

"God, *me*." Cameron surprised everybody and reached forward toward the bottle, stopping only when he realized everyone was staring at him like he'd just been cloned. "I want this over as soon as possible. I don't wanna have to sit through all of it."

"I hope it lands on me," Charlie said in an evil whisper, and everyone but Cameron heard it, basically solidifying his horrifying fate when the bottle did, in fact, land right on Charlie. No in-between or unsureness... right on Charlie. It was Cameron's lucky day. Charlie looked up at the terrified red head and raised an eyebrow. "Are you going to or should I?"

"Charlie Dalton cannot be my first kiss," Cameron freaked out.

"Hey, you knew the risks."

"I thought the chance was small enough!" Cameron defended.

"Clearly it was not," Charlie rolled his eyes, "Now do you wanna dread it forever or do you just wanna get it over with?" Neil wondered if

maybe his roommate was actually a psychopath. He was smiling too wide and laughing too much for a guy who had to kiss the guy he literally hated the most. Neil knew Cameron was never going to hear the end of this from Charlie or the rest of the guys. Charlie now had this hung over him. Sure, Cameron could ace a test, but Charlie Dalton would still be his first kiss. He could come out valedictorian, but Charlie Dalton would still be his first kiss. He couldn't wash it off. It *was* kind of funny considering how anti-gay Cameron was, but it also made Neil *really* think his roommate wasn't just metaphorically off his rocker.

Neil wanted to close his eyes as Charlie grabbed Cameron's white collar and gave him a very wet, vicious peck, but he couldn't. If everyone else was going to have this leverage, he could have it too, or, in a nicer way, he could debunk any lies that Charlie tried to tell other people. Charlie wouldn't be able to get away with half a lie about how Cameron *enjoyed* it because Neil would tell everyone in the vicinity that Cameron literally ran to the bathroom to brush his teeth after. It was for Cameron's benefit, really.

Charlie couldn't stop laughing, but eventually he calmed down enough to wipe a tear from his eye and put his hand on the bottle. "Me next then, huh?"

"Wait," Meeks said, "We're all gonna have to kiss two people."

"Not one of us," Charlie countered, giving Meeks no time for a response and spinning the bottle as ferociously as he'd tainted Cameron. It spun and spun and spun and Neil couldn't explain the sense of dread he felt when the bottle slowed down, pointing more and more toward Todd. Eventually, it landed right in between Todd and Knox, causing Neil to let out a breath he hadn't even known he'd been holding. He just didn't want Charlie to kiss Todd. He'd make a big deal of it and Todd would probably never let Neil hold his hand again. Not that he wanted to, it was just nice to have the option. For comfort. Charlie looked at the both of them. "Rock, paper, scissors."

Todd turned to Knox slowly. "Does the winner or loser have to kiss Charlie?"

"*Get* to," Charlie tried to correct, but he was shushed by Meeks.

"Loser," Knox decided. They played a two out of three, which Todd begged for when he lost the first round, and that betrayed Knox, causing him to lose and Todd to let out a sigh so heavy Neil felt it on

his shoulder. Neil absentmindedly reached over and patted Todd's thigh in an act of comfort while watching Knox demand that Charlie use some breath spray, as if he knew from experience that if he didn't, it would make everything worse. Neil was so entertained by it he hardly noticed that his hand hadn't left Todd's knee. Not until he felt Todd shove it off. He had little time to be offended. If he had allowed himself to be, he would've missed Charlie tormenting Knox exactly the way he had Cameron. Knox looked mildly displeased when Charlie pulled away and it was so funny Neil actually laughed. "Ew."

"Charlie your first kiss too, Knoxious?" Pitts asked.

Knox was silent in thought for a moment. "Yeah."

"Wait, wait, wait... does that mean..." Meeks turned and pointed right at Charlie. "That Cameron was *your* first kiss."

"Oh, no, gross," Charlie gagged, "I would not have been nearly as excited if that were the case."

Meeks dropped the accusing finger. "Who was then?"

Charlie mimicked a zipper motion on his mouth. "Lips are sealed."

Knox moved on quickly. "My turn I guess." He span and, luckily for Neil, didn't look disgusted at all when it landed on him. It really hit Neil then that he would actually be kissing someone. He wasn't just a bystander, he was actually a part of it and now all that stuff he had thought about Knox had left his head and he could only think about how nervous he was. Knox wouldn't be too bad of a person to have as his first kiss, that's not what he was worried about. He was worried that he would be *bad*. Knox had to crawl over Todd to get to Neil and that made it worse. What if he was bad in front of Todd? It didn't matter, but Todd wouldn't—Todd would... it would be bad, alright?

Neil never understood how you could feel stuff with your lips, and that was still applied when Knox's were pressed to his. He felt how smooth Knox's lips were and, somehow, how chapped his own were. It felt like an eternity and when Knox pulled away, Neil couldn't really remember his name for a few moments. The wet spot on the right side of his bottom lip snapped him back into reality when he felt it. Mindlessly, he went to wipe it off until he stalled and remembered that it wasn't *his* spit, it was Knox's. Knox's spit was on his lip. He tried to forget about it as he reached forward to the bottle and spun it with a random amount of force. He couldn't believe what he was seeing when it slowed down in Todd's direction, and he sure didn't believe it

when the bottle was suddenly soaring across the floor.

All eyes turned to Todd, whose foot was still out of place from the cross-legged position he'd previously been sitting in. No one said anything, but the silence itself asked Todd the question everyone was wondering. He tucked his leg back under himself and said, "Sorry... spasm."

"Well, I think it was going to land on you any—"

"Maybe it was just going to land on Neil," Todd interrupted Charlie, "We can't be sure. He should just spin again."

Charlie narrowed his eyes at the franticness in Todd's voice, but he didn't say anything about it, instead turning his attention to Neil. "Okay, Neil. Spin again." Neil did so, trying to replicate the exact force he had used on his first spin, but it didn't work out the same way, instead slowing down and landing on Pitts.

Well, Pitts wasn't too bad either. He would definitely never make fun of Neil for this. For the mercy he knew he was going to receive from his friend, Neil wanted to do the same for him and make sure he didn't feel how *atrociously* chapped his lips were, so he licked over them in an attempt to at least moisten them for the few seconds he needed to be kissing him. It was only until after that plan worked that Neil realized, horrified, that Knox's spit was now *in* his mouth, and somehow that was a lot worse than it just being on his lip. He scooted out of the circle and climbed backward onto his bed, watching from afar, and finally being the bystander he'd wished he'd been the entire time.

He paid no attention as Pitts spun and it landed on Meeks. Those two had probably kissed already anyway. It was nothing Neil needed to see. He was too busy debating over the *many* strange thoughts he had in his mind. Mostly the stuff about how he liked kissing Knox more than Pitts. He shouldn't have been thinking about it *still*. It was over. He shouldn't even *remember* how he felt while it was happening. For the first time, Neil genuinely questioned himself and his attractions. Last year he didn't *think* he was gay, he just thought he was *being* too gay. He was fairly sure he liked girls, well, he knew he did, and that was enough for him to stay secure for a while. But Todd's stupid way of shortening his words when he was tired and the softness of Knox's kiss made him question everything.

He snapped back into it just in time to see Meeks and Todd finishing

off the game and then rushing to opposite sides of the room. Todd was near *no one*, and Neil could only think about how glad he was that Todd had been the lucky one who only had to kiss one person. Charlie clapped and whistled loudly, smiling widely at all his friends. "Good job guys! We're officially a group of cocksuckers."

"Please do not say that," Todd begged.

"No shame, Toddsie," Charlie said in a surprisingly reassuring tone, patting him on the shoulder. "I'm gonna go bother Cameron. See you at lights out Neil!" Neil didn't even bother saying goodbye. Lights out was in two hours. No way Charlie could annoy Cameron for that long. You know what, actually, yes way. Charlie *would* be bothering Cameron for all that time. Knox followed him with pity for Charlie's victim and Meeks and Pitts just left, not even saying what they were going to be doing. Todd tried to leave too, but Neil ran and slammed the door shut as Todd tried to open it.

"Neil—!" Todd jumped.

"Sorry, sorry! Didn't mean to slam it that hard." Neil turned around and made sure he hadn't broken anything, and then looked back at Todd. "Are you alright?"

"I'm..." Todd thought, "I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I didn't enjoy this *at all*," Todd said and looked over his shoulder where 'this' had just happened. "So it's good evidence against me being... yeah, so I'm not that worried about it. I gotta go, Neil."

"Where?"

"Huh?"

"Where do you have to go?" Neil repeated.

"To do stuff."

"Like?"

"Damn it, Neil, can I just leave?"

"Why so eager?"

"I'm not *eager*—"

"Why did you shove me?" Neil cut him off, "And why did you kick the bottle when it was about to land on you?" Neil felt guilty asking the question, knowing in his head he had hoped he wouldn't have had to kiss Todd either, but at least he wasn't rubbing it in Todd's face.

"My leg was itchy..." Todd said, "And I didn't *kick* it, I just forgot how long my legs were for a second. I needed to stretch."

"Yet you said spasm...?"

"What are you trying to do here, Neil?"

"I'm trying to figure out why you're being weird!"

"I'm not!" Todd shouted out, "You questioning me about why I 'kicked' the bottle is weird! Why do you care?"

"Well, I don't have to be gay to be offended my friend doesn't wanna kiss me."

"Why would it *offend* you?"

"Why don't you wanna kiss me?"

"I do!" Todd shouted suddenly and then clapped his hand over his mouth, eyes widening when he realized that he had actually let that slip out of his mouth. Neil fell back from his offensive position and gave Todd time to process what had just happened, give him time to plan what he was going to say next. "I—I *did*," Todd corrected, "I was hoping you would be the only one I'd have to kiss, but then that *hope* made me feel all weird so I—so I made sure there was nothing to hope for. I wasted your turn so it wouldn't land on me. Sorry."

"Why were you..." Neil couldn't find the words. "Why were you hoping?"

"I just figured it'd be easier if it was you and not anyone else. That's it," Todd explained, "And it was... it was my first kiss. I thought telling people *Neil Perry* was my first kiss would make me seem too cool not to make fun of."

"What? The name *Steven Meeks* isn't gonna give you that same reaction?"

"Well, everyone loves Meeks but—"

"I love Meeks."

"Alright, I didn't say you didn't," Todd said, "But in the spectrum of the whole school... member' what I said last year? You're the best person to a lot of people. That lot of people would probably think I was awesome... probably."

"Were you planning on telling everyone?"

"Well, no." Todd scratched up and down his arm. "But if it happened to come up, I considered it a nice safeguard."

"Threw away your safeguard," Neil dryly laughed.

"Not technically," Todd said and looked away, "I put my thumb between our lips, so we didn't... yeah."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"And that's all?" Neil asked, "Not because of what Jeffery said about you and me?"

"Sorry I pushed your hand off... but what he said has really been buggin' me."

"I can tell." Neil looked over his shoulder at his bed and then led Todd over there so they were both sitting down. "You know what? Let's get this all in the open and stop being so stupid."

"Wh—What?"

"*If* you're gay, it's not a bad thing. If *I'm* gay..." Neil swallowed, not sure he was going to entirely believe his next words. "It's not a bad thing. If I liked you, so what? You're cool. If you liked me, even cooler. I'm *the best*. None of our friends would care or make a big deal out of it."

"I guess so," Todd slumped.

"But here's the thing," Neil continued, "We're *not,* so we don't have anything to be worried about. Unless we're full on making out, I don't think we should keep freaking out about being too *gay* with one another. Remember? The whole thing you told *me* last year? And, again, if we *were* gay, it wouldn't matter. Okay? So can we *both* stop being so fidgety and weird about it? I don't know if you felt the way I feel every time you shove me or have *spasms*, but if you did, I think

you know that neither of us have gotta feel like that."

"When did *you* become the homosexual voice of reason?"

"Why in the Lord's name would you call me that?"

Todd laughed, "Sounded the most right."

"It was *not*."

"I'm sorry," Todd said, but it wasn't because of the nickname. "Um, this might be weird, but if it would help in any way at all... I still wouldn't mind if you were my first kiss. It would just kinda suck cause I wouldn't be yours."

"You could've at least been *second*."

"I apologized for that!"

"Either way..." Neil laughed, "Do you want me to kiss you right now or am I picking up the wrong energy?"

"Is the energy gay?'"

"Not really. It's more anxious."

"That sounds way more like me."

"So?"

"Half a second. That's enough to count, right?"

"Yeah, maybe even less."

"Cool."

"Cool." Neil got it over with as quick as possible, not getting time to feel the texture of Todd's lips like he had Knox's. He tried to hide his disappointment and consider it an ultimate win. "...cool."

"Yeah," Todd said honestly, "Now can we talk about how Knox and Charlie have *definitely* done that before?"

Chapter End Notes

i did it. they kithed and im writing anderperry too much

Sixth—Conrad Birdie

Chapter Summary

> Neil reminisces about his love for a musical and then goes to annoy Todd early on his birthday morning.

Chapter Notes

> if you don't know anything about/have no idea what bye bye birdie is i am sorry but knowing the plot isnt particularly important

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first time Neil saw Bye Bye Birdie, he was seven. A local high school was performing it and Neil's parents really believed in supporting the high school's extracurricular activities. Sure, Neil's parents were the kind to hope that the ten dollars they paid for all three tickets was going to to go to the football team, but Neil saw this as an ultimate win. He didn't know it was a musical, and as far as he knew, he *hated* musicals. Even serious musicals! A song ruined any emotion Neil felt in any moment ever. At home, he had secretly just finished Romeo and Juliet, and when his mom was explaining the plot of Bye Bye Birdie to him the night before, he thought that they were similar enough.

He was excited to be able to enjoy it without getting in trouble. When his dad had found him reading the script of Romeo and Juliet, it had been ripped out of his hands and put away for Neil to never see again. The only thing it did was knock down Neil's self-esteem for he knew where his father kept confiscated items, and he knew where the key was too. Neil retrieved his play rather quickly, probably being able to convince his father that *he* had burned it if he decided to question Neil about the disappearance. He got no time to properly enjoy it, though, because it became less about the experience and more just about being able to finish it.

Neil loved the performing arts. He loved exceeding in front of people and impressing the masses. He loved sparking emotion in anyone that was watching him and he just loved being himself.

He, however, did not love musicals, and he nearly threw a fit when he found out that was what they were going to go see. To his credit, he

had *tried* musicals. He had stolen the old *Singing in the Rain* tape from his parents closet and popped it in the VCR when they were off at dinner. His babysitter was a fourteen-year-old girl who couldn't have cared less what Neil was watching on the TV unless it was hardcore porn, so he watched without interruption. By the first thirty minutes he *wished* that someone had taken the tape from him before he had the chance to burden himself with the knowledge of musicals and the catchy tune of the song *Singing in the Rain*.

His babysitter, her name was Avery, started watching it with him, and when it was over, she asked what he thought about it. Neil was five, but he launched into a very long rant about how musicals made no practical sense and he liked things that made practical sense, and then he stormed off. Avery had laughed at him and Neil got mad at her. Usually, he liked her. She was nice to him, made him snacks, and was much better than the old man his parents used to leave him with. Neil wasn't sure how much she got paid for dealing with him, but he figured it had to be a good amount if she was still there dealing with his tantrums.

She sat him down in the living room, apologized for laughing at him, and then explained why she thought musicals were awesome. Neil supposed that was his first *debate* practice because in the end she won out and tried teaching Neil the choreography in some of the dances. He didn't mind losing, and he didn't mind dancing. It was an important lesson for him. He learned that even if he hated musicals and Avery liked them, it wasn't really a big deal and they could still have fun together. Unfortunately, that was the last time Avery ever babysat him. He had slipped up at dinner and told his mom about what had happened and his father had lost it. His mother had to convince him not to call up Avery's parents and yell at them for their daughter trying to convert his son.

Neil supposed his father didn't like him doing girly things, but the more pressure put on him to be a doctor, the less he figured that and the more he figured his dad just didn't want him doing anything he *actually* liked to do. He ended up being right and wrong, but either way his father must've forgotten the incident by the time Bye Bye Birdie came around the next year because he took Neil without him having to even ask. First, Neil absolutely refused to indulge in the musical. For the first couple of numbers, he crossed his arms and turned up his nose. Then he realized that the girl playing Kim MacAfee was no one other than his old babysitter Avery, and then he found the inspiration to pay attention and Bye Bye Birdie became more than a musical to him.

At the end of the show, his parents got caught up in some conversation with some other important adults and Neil took the opportunity to run away and find Avery. She was *surrounded* by people telling her how good her performance was, but she pushed past all of them when she saw Neil. He was afraid she'd be mad at him, but actually she was excited to see him, and even more excited to hear that Neil had *liked* this musical. He raved on and on and on about it and she had to shush him. Ever since then, *Conrad Birdie* was a very high desirable roll on his list. It was the only role he *desired* day in and day out. Every day he woke up and thought about how much he wanted to play Conrad Birdie.

By middle school, he'd given up on that dream, but he hadn't given up on his secret love for the show. It was more subtle, but it definitely resurfaced when he started telling Todd about it. He could've performed it beginning to end for his friend, but he held back and decided that if there was ever a performance nearby, he'd take Todd to it. That decision paid off when right around Todd's birthday, Neil learned about the production of Bye Bye Birdie at Henley Hall. Usually, Henley Hall waited till December for their performances, but it was *musical year* and Neil was lucky. He was lucky he had just gotten birthday money from his grandma and he was lucky that he'd used half of it to buy a bike. He forged a permission slip from his own parents and talked Jeffery into getting his parents to sign something so Neil could forge their signature too.

He snuck out, he bought the tickets early, and he returned to his dorm like it was Christmas Eve. It was Todd's birthday eve (the show was *on* his birthday? Who said Neil couldn't be lucky [Neil did]) and Neil was planning to surprise him. He was hoping it didn't come off as lame to Todd as it was coming off to Charlie, who Neil was explaining his whole plan too while they both stared at their dark ceiling after lights out. Neil couldn't sleep cause he was ecstatic. Charlie couldn't sleep because he decided he didn't want to sleep that night.

"I mean, personally, I'm not into it," Charlie said, "But if you think Todd'll be down, he probably will be."

"I think he will be," Neil responded, now unsure of his entire plan, but having to accept that anxiety because there was no going back now. "But I don't know. What if he just thinks it's stupid?"

"Then he thinks it's stupid and *I'll* go with you," Charlie responded, "And he can sit all alone in his room thinking about how mean he was."

"But you just said you're not into it."

"I'm not into musicals," Charlie clarified, "But I'm into revenge. Seriously, it's like you haven't been my roommate for two and a half years."

"Sometimes I block out the trauma."

"You're dumb. Stupid," He said pointedly, "And it just hit me—what are you so worried about? Didn't Todd give you that record for your birthday?"

Neil didn't know how he had forgotten it. That record he saw at the bottom of Todd's bag the first day—it was a Bye Bye Birdie record. He had no idea how Todd had gotten his hands on it or why he would even *bother* to go that far for Neil's birthday, but it was the best present ever. It was under his bed right then, safely wrapped inside some plastic. He wasn't sure he'd actually ever play it. Maybe he'd just hang it up on the wall and stare at it. "Doesn't mean he likes it."

"Well, how about you just go to sleep and find out, then?" Charlie asked, "You're annoying me."

"You are the one who decided to stay awake."

"I didn't realize you would be this annoying."

"It's like you haven't been my roommate for two and a half years."

"Touche," Charlie said into the darkness. "Still, shut up."

"But—"

"Shut up."

"Good—"

"Shut up!"

"Jesus Christ, Charlie," Neil said, "I was saying goodnight."

"I'm strict about my rules."

"Clearly." Neil turned over and brought his blanket to his chin, staring at the wall. He wanted to go to sleep. He wanted tomorrow evening to come as soon as possible, but it was that very excitement that was keeping it from happening. Eventually, who knows when, his eyelids

gave up on him and suddenly his room was bright. It was like he had blinked himself into the next day, but it didn't really matter to him. He jumped out of bed, seeing Charlie passed out, and ran out of the room. When he got to Todd and Knox's room, he got quieter. Neither of them were as heavy a sleeper as Charlie. He pushed the door open and knelt by Todd's bed.

He went to poke Todd in the face and annoy him awake, but he paused for a moment. Todd looked really... calm... when he was asleep. Neil didn't realize until that moment how anxious Todd's natural resting face was. Sleeping Todd nearly looked happy. He didn't know how long he stared, but eventually he snapped back into it and poked Todd. "Todd. Toddsie."

Todd stirred and Neil saw his eyes open as little as they possible could. When Todd recognized what was going on, he groaned and rolled over. "Neil."

"Happy Birthday," Neil whispered, just in case he had woken up Knox. Todd had made Neil promise that if he was going to made his birthday such a big deal, he couldn't let the other guys know. Todd was planning on pretending that the day they *thought* was his birthday actually was his birthday for at least another few years. Neil didn't know why... maybe so Todd could build up the guilt or something... but it wasn't like he could object. He'd tried to keep his own birthday a secret his first year, and he didn't know why. Maybe it was just a birthday thing. "Idiot."

"*Neil.*"

Neil shook him. "Come on."

"G'away."

"Not a chance, birthday boy."

Todd groaned again and rubbed his eyes, looking over at Neil's face and seeing that Neil was definitely not going to be leaving any time soon. As always, Neil Perry was going through with his plans and he wasn't letting anyone change them. "I jus' wanna sleep, Neil. Jus' for now."

"If you don't get up, I'll climb into that bed with you."

"Alright." Todd rolled over and curled up into a little ball to try and keep the light out of his face, calling Neil's bluff. And it *had* been a

bluff. Neil wasn't really planning on climbing onto Todd's bed to be *that* annoying. He just really thought the threat would be enough for Todd to get out of bed—bluff or not. Neil was angry at Todd's lack of caring, but he was also angry at Todd's lack of belief in his threats. Sure, this one particularly had been empty, but Neil couldn't let Todd think that he could get away with this. He ripped the covers up and slid under them, as close as he could to Todd who froze. It was silent for a few moments. "I ave' come to the realuhzation' that this migh' not be alright."

"Why not?" Neil asked, "I'm pretty comfortable."

"Bed's like a foot wide," Todd tried to roll onto his back, but his shoulder ran into Neil's and he went back to staring at the wall. "I like avin' it to muhself."

"I dunno what to tell you, Todd," Neil said, "Should've gotten up."

Todd yawned and all he replied with was, "Mm." Neil didn't know how to work with that, so he turned over and stared at the back of Todd's head. He could be a jerk and take up some of the space, but he didn't want to take up *all* of it. Todd was right. Those beds were tiny, barely even made for half a boy let alone two. "Wus' yur' plan now, Einstein?"

Neil crossed his arms. "I think I'll just stay right here."

"Mm," Todd said again, but it was a disgusted 'mm'. He rubbed the back of his neck and tried to shuffle away, only to bang his knee against the wall. Neil asked him what that was for, and he groaned *again*. "Yur' breathin' on the backa' my neck."

"Don't know what to tell you."

Todd mumbled something obscene under his breath and angrily whipped his body around until him and Neil were facing one another. Usually, no matter how many blankets you put on that bed, it was freezing, but right then Neil couldn't stop sweating. He figured Todd was too tired to freak out about how close they were, but he hoped he wasn't freaking because of their talk the other week. You know, the one where they literally kissed? This was nothing compared to that. That's why Neil himself definitely wasn't freaking out. And he definitely wasn't thinking about how he had the opportunity to actually feel what Todd's lips felt like right then. And for sure he wasn't staring at Todd's mouth too much that he didn't even notice that Todd's eyes were closed.

Todd opened one eye. "Yur' still here?"

"You know it." Neil blew on his friend's face just because he knew it would annoy him.

Todd swatted at the air and then slapped Neil in the face. "Is' my *burthday*."

"Then get out of bed."

"M' tired," He said, "S'early, Neil."

"Open your other eye and then see if I care." Neil hadn't actually checked the clock when he left his room, but he knew it *was* probably pretty early. Six or seven, at the earliest. He also knew that he was a lot less awake than he was pretending that he was. By a good estimate, he probably fell asleep at three last night, and three-four hours of sleep was not nearly enough for Neil Perry. He only realized how tired he was when he felt how *good* it was to have his face on a pillow and to be snuggled under blankets. He tried to hold back a yawn, but it didn't work and Todd raised any eyebrow at him. "Don't gimme that. I'm not goin' anywhere."

"Hen' don't," Todd said sassily, "Sleep righ' there fur all I care."

"I'm *not* tired," Neil tried, feeling another yawn coming on.

"M'kay, Neil." Todd closed both his eyes and nuzzled into his pillow. "See ya' in an hour, tupid'."

"...Todd?"

"What."

"I mean, I know I kinda did this to myself, but I'm falling off the bed just a lil' over here."

"Dumb," Todd said shortly and Neil thought that he would just have to deal with one leg hanging off the bed until Todd scooted his back all the way against the wall. That was enough space, but then Todd threw his arm around Neil's back and pulled him closer by his shoulder blade. Their foreheads were touching and Neil was sure that if Todd wasn't three-quarters of the way asleep he would get another slap in the face for all the breathing he was doing. Neil's right arm was under the pillows, giving them more leverage, but his left arm was aligned by his side, straight as a pencil. "Bettuh?"

"Yeah, thanks."

"Okay." Todd went silent and left his arm wrapped around Neil's shoulder and Neil just decided *what the hell*. He took his annoyingly tense free arm and let it rest on Todd's side. If he minded, he didn't say, so Neil left it there and closed his own eyes. He'd never slept in the same bed as Todd before. Well, not *purposefully*. The time Todd had sat on top of him and unconsensually recited Dracula, they'd fallen asleep and he woke up with Todd still on top of him, but his face was significantly closer to Neil's. It was the best night of sleep Neil had gotten at Welton.

Neil kept his eyes closed, but whispered, "Todd?"

"Neil?"

"Sorry, I just—"

"I wan' sleep, Neil."

"This is okay, right?"

Todd was quiet for a second. "Mhm."

"Okay. You sure?"

"M' sure, tupid'."

"Okay, okay... Todd?"

"Neil."

"Never mind, nothin'."

"Well, now m' curious..."

"No, it's weird."

"Usually is..."

"Shut up."

"What is it, Neil? Won' judge ya'. Promise."

"Okay... I just... it just occurred to me that—that right now would've been a better first kiss for you."

"...oh."

"Sorry, I told you it was weird."

"No, yur right. So do you wanna kiss?"

"No! No. I was just thinking."

"Alrigh,' Neil."

"Go to sleep, Todd."

"Don' hafta' tell me twice..."

Neil didn't say another word and finally let Todd fall asleep. His eyes were still closed, but Todd's breathing evened out in a way that would never happen if he were still awake, so Neil knew he had to be asleep. He was mad at himself, and not for even thinking and saying that stuff, but for ruining Todd's first kiss. Todd had specifically wanted it to be *him* and he had done it in the worst way possible. Not that it mattered in any way other than the fact that it was Todd's *first* kiss and that Neil had disappointed him. Neil had disappointed Todd. That's all it was. Not that Neil wanted Todd to *enjoy* kissing him instead of just getting it over with.

No, not at all.

His stupid brain couldn't help but compare this to Bye Bye Birdie. The whole point of the play was Conrad Birdie going off to war and getting one last kiss before he did. That hadn't gone well for him either. Maybe Neil really would be the perfect Conrad Birdie.

Chapter End Notes

> i promise im not weird i was on tech for bye bye birdie freshman year so i know all about it and it was made in the 1960s but i do not care. its a good moosical

Sixth—A Good Birthday

Chapter Summary

Neil and Todd finally go see a musical together.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Holy shit," Neil let out under his breath. He wasn't one to talk during plays, but the curtains had just opened, and he realized that he knew one of the actors on stage. He hadn't expected to, so he had left Todd to stick his head in the program that he'd grabbed as a memento, and he was beginning to regret that. If he had read it in the first place he wouldn't have gasped when the lights came up. Todd turned to his friend and raised a questioning eyebrow, which Neil could barely see in the dark of the audience. He waved it off and tried to enjoy the show, and it was easy. It was easy because his old babysitter was playing the lead female role.

Neil thought that he would be too distracted at the aspect of seeing her to focus on the show, but when he saw Todd bopping his head along to the second song, *the telephone hour*, he let himself focus on that. Todd tried not to like music, Neil could tell, but he really did. When he was having a hard time doing his school work or just panicking in general, Neil whipped out *Stand By Me* and it did the trick, and when the radio wasn't on hand (a.k.a. Meeks and Pitts didn't want to cough it over) Neil tried his best to sing it to Todd. It always worked, so he decided to be absolutely annoying and mouth along with all the words and bump into Todd throughout the entire show. Surprisingly, Todd was loving it.

During intermission, Todd had to go to the bathroom, so Neil stood up and they tried to find it together. It was basically a maze trying to get there, but once they did, Neil leant against the wall next to the paper towel dispenser while Todd occupied a urinal on the other side. They were the only ones in there, so Neil spoke out into the echoey bathroom. "So... what do you think?"

"Are you really gonna interrogate me while I'm peeing?"

"It's a half-way check-in," Neil bargained, "I'll bother you more later, promise."

"Somehow, I do not feel better."

"Shove it, Todd," He said, "What do you think?"

"I like it," Todd responded, speaking extra loud to cover up the sound of him going to the bathroom. He hated it enough at Welton, Neil knew that, so he was sure that him standing right there wasn't helping at all. "It's good. Would be better if you left me alone."

"I'm trying to prove my dominance."

"I'm not trying to out *Bye Bye Birdie* you." Todd zipped his pants up and headed straight for the sink. Neil followed behind him. "So you can calm down, stupid." He washed his hands in a very dramatic manner to prove that he was cleanly and then they headed back for their seats. They still had a couple of minutes, so Todd sighed and looked over at his friend. "If you're wondering what I think of your present, I think it's great."

"Really?" Neil responded without making eye-contact, setting his sights on the dark velvet curtain ten rows of seats in front of them. He twiddled with his thumbs. "I thought you mighta' not liked it."

"Why wouldn't I like it?" Todd asked, "I've never seen you so energetic. That's the best present I could ask for. The catchy songs are just a plus."

Neil shoved his shoulder. "Shut up."

"I'm serious!" Todd said, "I like seeing you happy."

"But—But *you're* happy too, though, right?"

"Yeah." Todd nodded. "I really am." And Neil became happier than Todd said he was because his stupid smile could make Neil happy in the worst of moods. That's all they were doing for a moment—smiling at each other—until the lights went back down and they watched the rest of the show. It went by all too quick, but by the bows Neil was already going into his in-depth rant about how he enjoyed the first act much more than the second. Todd listened to him go on and on as the curtain closed again and they realized they should've headed out because it was getting dark, and who knew how long their forged permission slips would let them stay out.

"Wait." Neil tugged Todd's wrist and kept him from leaving, dragging him through the Henley theatre lobby where the actors were getting

praise and compliments. He brought Todd right up to his old babysitter and stood there for a silent moment. Surprisingly, she wasn't being swarmed even though Neil thought she surely deserved it. Seriously. Last time she was in this show she was Kim MacAfee... this time she was Rose Alvarez! That was huge. He stared at her and was completely at a loss for words. He wasn't even sure she would recognize him. Well, not until he was being wrapped in a hug.

"Neil! You're so—how old are you?" Avery pulled back, but didn't take her hands off of his shoulders. Suddenly, Todd looked starstruck. It was like Dick Van Dyke had just patted Neil on the shoulder and called him son. Avery shook her head and hugged him again. "I can't believe we keep meeting like this."

"Twelve. I'm twelve," Neil answered, not even being able to do the math to figure out how old Avery had to be. Graduated at least, he thought, and ending up in the same production she'd been in during high school. "Bye Bye Birdie? Again?"

"Call me nostalgic," She responded, and then noticed the shadow over Neil's shoulder. That's what Todd did when Neil caught himself up in conversations with people that Todd didn't know. He would hide behind his right shoulder and clutch onto the back of his shirt. It was endearing. "Who'd you come with?"

Neil didn't pull Todd out from behind him and shove him right into Avery's eyesight, but he did reach his hand behind his back and grab Todd's, tapping it a few times. It was their silent communication. The tapping was Neil asking if Todd was alright to come out of hiding. The extra clutch on the fabric of the shirt was Todd saying no, so Neil left him back there and looked back up to Avery. "His name's Todd. It's his birthday today, so I brought him here."

Avery was always good with people younger than her, so she didn't push to make Todd more uncomfortable than he clearly already was. She looked at the top of his head for a moment and gave him an angelic smile. "Well, Todd, I hope you liked it."

"I did," Todd said quietly, "You were good."

"Thank you."

"Really good!" Neil added, "I mean, *Spanish Rose*? That was awesome! I got goosebumps."

She put her hand in his hair and ruffled it. "I'm glad to see you haven't

changed a bit."

"I'm glad you remember me."

"Of course I do!" She seemed offended Neil would ever imply such a thing. "Your voice is in my head during rehearsals. It's how I remind myself that some people in the audience might be looking for some practical sense." Neil was about to say something, he didn't know what, but Avery interrupted him by very suddenly greeting a costar who had just walked up to them, and his jaw dropped open. It was Conrad Birdie. Just like Avery was still in her red dress and fancy hat, he was still in a leather jacket and sleek jeans. He saw the awestruck look on the boy's face and looked to Avery. "Oh! Josh, this is Neil. Neil, this is Josh. I used to babysit him." She leaned over to his ear and whispered, "He's a big fan of Conrad Birdie."

"Really?" Josh had to be older than Avery, making him twice as cool. He put his hands in front of him like he was framing a picture. "I can see it already. And your friend..." Josh reached forward and pulled Todd out from behind Neil, obviously being less socially aware than his female costar. He examined Todd for a moment and then patted him on the shoulder. "Yup. Definitely an Albert Peterson type."

"I—I don't sing," Todd stuttered out.

"That's what *you* think," Josh responded, looking down at the program in Todd's hands. He swiped it and flipped through it, then he took a pen out from his pocket and signed the inside of the front page. After he handed it back, Neil expected Todd to be at his side again, but Todd stayed right in front of Josh. "What are you? Like seven? You've got a whole life ahead of you to start singing."

"I'm twelve."

"Close enough."

"It's my birthday." Neil widened his eyes at Todd's revelation. No way he just told this random actor it was his birthday when he didn't even want his friends back at school to know.

"Your birthday!" Josh shouted out and then looked around him, mumbling something about how this situation required more than an obnoxious autograph. He groaned out angrily. "Where *is* he?"

"Why are you asking me?" Avery said, "You should know."

"I hardly know," Josh looked at her, "Harley! Harleeeyyyy!"

Avery rolled her eyes and signaled for Neil to cover Todd's ears. He did so. She stepped forward and shouted, "Harley Richardson! Your beau is looking for you!" After she did that and Todd's ears were uncovered, another boy revealed himself from the crowd. He was wearing a black hat and suit. He had to be the one playing Albert Peterson. Avery gestured over to Josh and stepped back to where she had been before, giving Todd a smile when she saw that his anxiety about people had returned. "He needed something."

Harley looked over at Josh, and Neil noticed he subtly put his hand on the other's arm. "What?"

"It's this little dude's birthday." Josh threw a thumb over his shoulder at Todd, who was slowly sliding back to Neil. Neil betrayed him and shoved him more forward. "And he came here."

"And?"

"Have you no brain?" Josh asked and then swiped the hat right off his head and knelt in front of Todd. He dusted it off and then set it on Todd's head, it falling over half of his face because of the combination of the bigger size and the fact that he had a small head. He pushed it up nervously and looked up at Josh. "That's for you. Happy Birthday."

"Thank you," Todd said, and then successfully placed himself behind Neil again. This time Neil let him stay there, but he nearly regretted that as Josh shuffled over to him next. He was still a head taller than Neil, even when he was on his knees.

"And for you, my man." He reached up and slowly pulled his sunglasses from the top of his head, then, trying very hard not to stab Neil in the eye, he put the sunglasses on his face. "Let the spirit of Conrad Birdie be with you."

"You're so..." Harley trailed off and pulled Josh up from the ground. He looked over to Avery. "Please tell me you know these children."

She looked over with a smile on her face. "I do."

"Good," Harley sighed, "I was worried he was giving presents to random kids again."

"You *love* me," Josh said condescendingly.

"Unfortunately." Then Josh got dragged away by his hand because apparently they both had important things to attend to, leaving the two boys alone with Avery once again.

"You should probably get going. It's dark," Avery noted, "How'd you get here?"

"Bike," Neil answered, "But Welton's not that far."

"Welton?" Avery asked with a scrunched face, "I can't believe your dad actually did that to you."

"Uh... yeah."

"Well, Neil, I'm really happy you came." She patted him on the shoulder and looked back at Todd. "You too, Todd. Happy Birthday."

"Thank you."

Neil was a bit distracted on the bike ride back to Welton. Todd was standing on his back pegs clinging to him like a lifeline, he could barely see, and Josh and Harley— "Do you think they were dating?"

"Huh?" Todd asked, and it was hard to hear him when he was talking right into the wind above Neil's head. "Who?"

"Josh and—and Harley?" Neil clarified and he felt Todd's fingernails dig into his shoulders, so he got his answer even before Todd responded.

"I think so," He said, "...why?"

"Just wondering," Neil said, "It was... nice."

"Nice?"

"Yeah. I'm... Well, I'm glad that they can do that."

"I guess so."

They didn't say anything to each other until Neil was locking his bike back into the rack. Todd's hands were shoved in his pockets and Neil wanted his hands to be covered too, but instead they were shaking against the cold metal lock of his bike rack. He was trying to rush, but the rushing made him shiver more and he kept messing up his lock. Todd stood there impatiently while Neil tried his best to hurry it up so they could go inside. It was too close to lights out for their liking.

Finally he got it and he stood back up, already turning around to go back inside, but Todd stopped him.

"Neil?"

He turned back around, "Yeah?" Todd surged forward and hugged him, and unlike last year, Neil didn't take too long to reciprocate it. He heard Todd sniffling and he could only hope that it was because of the cold. He didn't want Todd to be crying on his birthday. "Todd?"

"Thank you," Todd muttered, "For this."

"Was just a play..." Neil said back.

"No," Todd shook his head, "Maybe to you, but not even my parents have ever—it doesn't matter. Thank you. It was a good birthday."

"Wanna know what would make it even better?" Neil asked through a smirk.

He could tell that Todd was smiling from his response. "What?"

"A really good shower."

Todd laughed and pulled away from Neil. "Have I ever told you how stupid you are?"

"Plenty."

Chapter End Notes

todd and neil seeing an open mlm relationship? hope this doesn't inspire something in them...

Sixth—Morning Grass and Ocean Water

Chapter Summary

After Christmas break, Neil makes some discoveries about Todd.

Chapter Notes

CW// Homophobic slur
TW!!!!!// Explicit mentions of self-harm, self-harm
if that's not for you, that's okay. we're not gonna pretend this book has a real plot anyway, so you won't be missing anything :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sometimes Neil bit Todd. Sometimes they got into a wrestling match and the only way to get the upper hand was to bite Todd's finger. Sometimes Todd bit him and he needed to get revenge. Most times, hugging Todd wasn't enough, so Neil bit him. Neil bit him during study hall, Neil bit him when they were hanging out with the other boys, and Neil bit him when they were reading under their tree. The one place where Neil never bit Todd was the bathrooms. Todd hated being in there enough, he didn't need anyone *biting* him to make it worse. He couldn't tell anyone why he did it, but Neil loved biting Todd. It always made Todd smile that *stupid, stupid* smile when Neil was being an idiot and Todd just couldn't get mad at him. When Neil would distract him with something so endearing and adorable that Todd would forget he was even annoyed in the first place.

Todd bit Neil too, just not nearly as much. Neil wondered how Todd dealt with anything before they'd met, because all of his coping mechanisms for his anxious tendencies had developed into always incorporating Neil. Around new people, he clutched at the back of his friend's shirt. During outside time if there was a presentation coming up in the next class, he tapped his friend's knee in repeated and different patterns. Whenever he was just generally in a bad mood, he would make Neil wash his hands and then bite the ends of his fingertips. Never hard. More like he was lightly chewing gum. Neil had no idea why or how it made Todd feel better, but he let him do it. It was just hard to explain to Charlie when he walked in with Neil doing his math homework with one hand and letting Todd bite the fingers on his other. Not that Charlie had any right to question anything him and Todd did when him and Knox were doing things ten times weirder. Not when Meeks and Pitts were down the hall probably

engaging in some sort of ritual dance.

Neil bit Todd on the shoulder. Always on the top of his right shoulder. He really, *really* never knew why he did it, but sometimes he'd just be standing behind Todd and then lean forward and bite him. Todd absolutely hated it, and most of the times that he did it he was met with a groan and a *I knew you were going to do that!* Neil never stopped. For some reason in his mind, biting Todd was a better way to show his appreciation for him than hugging him. He thought maybe he should start reserving his hugs for the people he actually had a crush on, but that logic was thrown out the window when Charlie caught him crying and hugged him so hard he couldn't remember why he was sad. He was not about to rob himself of hugs, but there were other things Neil was slowly starting to stop doing with his friends, reserving them in the back of his mind for his future spouse.

But he never stopped biting Todd. Ever.

In a shocking twist of events, the first day back after Christmas break, Neil bit Todd's arm. He was laying on his bed and Todd was sitting near his face, reading through the syllabus of a new class he'd spontaneously decided to join. Neil had missed Todd over the break, having not been able to say goodbye to him after his father whisked him away early after the Christmas concert. Mr. Perry had only temporarily paused to call Charlie Dalton a 'fine young man' to his mother, not letting Neil say goodbye to him either. So Neil was excited that Knox had wanted to do the ol' roommate switcheroo that night. Less so when he saw how nervous Todd was about his new class. Neil spent a lot of time around Todd, but he knew the worst of his anxiety was when he was in his own dorm with his roommate about to go to sleep. It was always the worst for him right before he went to bed. If he didn't sort out anything and everything, sleep wouldn't be available.

Seeing Todd so pent up made Neil want to show him how okay things were right then, so he leant over and bit Todd on the arm. He was expecting an annoyed groan, but not a groan of pain. Neil knew the difference between the two, so he shot up immediately and stared at the side of Todd's face. He could tell that Todd knew he'd messed up. He had a look on his face that made it seem like he'd just been caught mid-robbery. He put his head in his knees and covered his face with his syllabus. Neil delicately took the paper away and lifted Todd back up from the wrists. "Did I bite you that hard?"

Todd swallowed. "Yeah. Don't know your own power sometimes."

Neil squinted. "Are you lying to me?"

"I'm not, promise."

"Todd..."

"I might be."

Neil dropped one of Todd's arms and took the other one in both of his hands. He didn't know what he was looking for, he didn't know what he was expecting, but he knew there would be some sort of consequence if he pretended he hadn't noticed and let Todd continue on. Todd was wearing his Welton blazer, and it was much too thick to roll up his arm, so Neil looked back into Todd's eyes. "Take if off."

"Please don't try to undress me."

"I'm trying to get *you* to undress you," He said, "So do it now please."

"I don't want to, Neil."

"I don't care," Neil said plainly, "So unless you want me to do it for you..."

Todd gave in and slipped off the blazer, revealing the plain long sleeve white t-shirt underneath. He tried to pull back when Neil grabbed his arm, but Neil held on as tightly as he could without hurting him again. Placing his fingers hesitantly on the brim of the sleeve, Neil became more worried than ever. Clearly this was something Todd didn't want him to see, but it was also clearly something that was hurting him. Would he know how to deal with whatever it was that he saw? Was he really the right person to be comforting Todd?

Well, maybe not, but he wanted to be, so that was enough.

He rolled up Todd's sleeve and Todd winced at the look on his face. It wasn't much. A few tiny holes poked along Todd's arm, but there were scars, and scabs, and proof that the fresh ones Neil was seeing were not the only ones that had been there. Neil looked up to his friend, who looked ashamed, like he really *had* been caught participating in a crime, and he didn't want to frown at him, but he had to. The last thing he wanted was for Todd to think he was upset with him, but he couldn't hide it. Neil was upset with him. He set Todd's arm across his lap and looked back down at it. "Did you do this?"

Todd nodded slowly, but he clearly wasn't very proud of his admission. He tried again to take his arm back, but Neil held it firmly in place. "With what? A toothpick?" Neil didn't like how harsh his voice was coming off, but it was getting harder to hide. He was *angry* at Todd. If anything, he should've been sad, maybe even crying, but no, he was mad. He was irritated. He wanted to know why Todd *ever* thought that this was an acceptable thing to do to himself. Todd didn't answer and Neil stared at the ground. "Well?" The prolonged silence was making Neil's blood boil. "Come on, Todd! Tell me! Tell me right now!"

Todd choked on a strangled cry. "Ple—Please don't... don't be..." He couldn't even get a whole sentence out, and it made Neil feel even worse about his anger. He'd never seen Todd cry like this before, but he'd cried like this himself. The kind of sob where you couldn't even breathe, where your body took forceful gasps to make sure you didn't run out of air, and where saying anything felt practically impossible. Neil fell to his knees and moved himself in front of Todd, who tried to shove his head in his hands to hide his crying, but Neil stopped him from doing so by taking his hands and squeezing them so hard he definitely cut off the circulation. "Don't... Please—...don't be mad at me."

"I'm not," Neil lied, squeezing Todd's hands harder at the sight of him. It was heartbreaking.

"You are!" Todd insisted through tears.

"Maybe I am," Neil shamefully admitted, but then looked back into Todd's eyes. "But right now, I just want you to breathe. Can you breathe? Like me?" Neil accentuated his in-and-out breaths and leaned his head under Todd's bowed one. "Can you do that?" Todd tried, but his breaths stuttered as much as he did when he talked. "I won't yell at you again. I promise, and I'm sorry... I—I just..."

"It's okay," Todd said quietly, "I deserve to get yelled at."

"No, you don't," Neil contradicted quickly, "You deserve—I couldn't even tell you what you deserve, Todd! Not this. Not whatever this is. Will you *please* tell me what's wrong?" Neil rubbed his thumb of Todd's knuckle. "Please?"

"Your pins," Todd said after a long moment of silence. "You—You left so suddenly. Charlie didn't tell me you were leaving after the concert. I—I came to your room and you weren't here, but you left your blazer.

It smelt like you, so I... I took it."

Neil could see Todd descending into panic, so he stood up, his hands still clinging tightly to his friend's, and sat down back on the bed beside him. "Yeah? What do I smell like?"

Todd shook his head and rubbed his nose off on his shoulder sleeve. "I don't know. Like grass. Morning grass, and water... you smell like water. Ocean water. Wet sand?" Todd let out a little laugh at himself. "No, that sounds bad. You smell like morning grass and ocean water."

"Salty?" Neil pressed with a smile.

"Very salty," Todd sniffled, "Jeff thought it was—well, you probably know what Jeff thought, but he promised not to make it a thing. Not to tell mom and dad. Jeff's promises are worth nothing as soon as you make him mad."

"He told?" Neil asked.

"Didn't just tell," Todd laughed again, but it was completely void of humor. "Made up a whole little story to his parents about their fag son. I don't even—" Todd choked on another gasp of tears and Neil gave him time to catch his breath again. "I don't even know what I did. But my parents—well, I *know* very well that I'm a disappointment compared to Jeffery, but it's different... *worse*... when they're saying it right to my face"

"You're not a disappointment," Neil said, "Why would you ever think that?"

"Why would I?" Todd responded, "You don't get it. You're so—... you're so perfect, Neil, you're just like him. I'm nothing standing next to either of you, but at least you don't make me feel bad about it."

"Todd—"

"So I was... I was real upset," Todd went on, not letting Neil get a word of praise in. "I was cryin', all that stuff... then I remembered I had your jacket—your blazer, so I grabbed it, but I forgot about your pins. Your honor roll one stabbed me kinda hard." Todd looked down to a specific spot on his arm. "I don't know why, but it made me feel better. So I kept... I kept doin' it. I didn't think you were gonna make such a big deal out of it."

"A big deal out of it?" Neil asked, "This *is* a big deal, Todd. You're not

nothing. You're—you're everything." Neil could tell Todd was about to object, so he talked quickly to prevent him from doing so. "To me. You're everything to me, and you can't say you aren't. You're everything to me, to Charlie, to Knox... but... you're *my person*, Todd. You're the best. Nothing holds a candle to you."

"You're just saying that cause I'm crying."

"I'll say it to you everyday if I have to," Neil went on, "I'm not kidding, I'm not even exaggerating. You're so important to me. You're my best friend."

"Stop it," Todd said, "I don't like compliments."

"Then you stay right there, and I'll be right back." Neil tried to be in and out of the infirmary as quickly as he could. All the objects he ere grabbing were going to warrant too many questions that he wouldn't be able to answer. He dropped all of it on his bed and rolled up Todd's sleeve again, since Todd had tried to hide it. He took alcohol wipes, disinfectant, ointment—basically anything he could and started wiping it on Todd's arm. He was still angry, but he also didn't know how he felt. Todd did *this* to himself. Neil wasn't aware you could do something like that to yourself. Todd couldn't of been aware of it either, until Neil's pin... *Neil's* pin. An honor roll pin of all things. Something Neil owned had did this to Todd. *Todd Anderson.* The boy who slept-hummed the tunes to Neil's favorite musical. If there was anyone who didn't deserve this, it was Todd. "Do you still have it?"

"In my room," Todd said, "I can give it back. I should probably give it back."

"I can get another blazer," Neil dismissed, "Keep your bed smelling like morning grass and ocean water."

"That was so stupid," Todd muttered, "I should've just said *good*."

"Wanna know what you smell like?" Neil asked, putting band-aids on the freshest of Todd's wounds. He couldn't help but notice that if you connected the dots, they spelt words. Well, one word. A word Todd said a lot in reference to himself, so Neil covered up some of the cuts with band-aids even when he didn't need to. He wanted to distract Todd from everything going on inside his head. He never wanted to admit to Todd that he had stolen one of his shirts and that he kept under his pillow. It wasn't really his fault that the smell of Todd calmed him down when he was having his own little panicky moment, and it wasn't really his fault Todd didn't notice one of his many

identical shirts was missing. Todd nodded to Neil's question, reminding him that he didn't really have an answer. "Book pages and rain."

"And rain smells different than the ocean?"

"You tell me," Neil said, "You've smelt rain and ocean water haven't you, mister lake house?"

"Shut up," Todd shoved him, "Book pages... what's that mean?"

"Have you ever just opened a book and been hit with that whiff of paper smell?" Neil asked, "Okay, that was a bad explanation, but... shove your nose in a book, *not* metaphorically, and just breathe. It's soothing. And books remind me of you anyway."

"What else reminds you of me?" Todd asked it shyly, not looking up at his friend. Neil smiled and threw away all the trash he had, then he slid to the top of his bed, slipped his legs under the blankets, pulled the covers up next to him, and patted the spot. Todd crawled up and into it like he was a cat. Neil took off the Welton uniform he was wearing, luckily wearing a regular shirt underneath it, and then reached behind Todd's head and turned off the dusty old lamp that lit up the room when it was near lights out. Neil left his arm above Todd's head once the lights were out, and ended up being surprised when Todd scoot closer into his arms. "I'm in a mood. I think it'll calm me down."

"Mm," Neil thought, "Lake houses."

"You're dumb," Todd responded, "I'm being serious."

Neil laughed. "Fine, fine! Chocolate ice cream... uh, fedoras, Christmas!"

"Christmas?" Todd asked, "You're reaching."

"I'm not," Neil argued, "Dracula, Frank Sinatra, drive-in movies, Henley hall, trees, probably morning grass now, so dew by association —" Neil cut himself off when he heard the shallow sound of even breathing.

Todd was asleep.

Chapter End Notes

my sweet baby boy i hate to do this to him but sometimes i gotta

also, i love comments, you all make me happy :) ive been obsessed with writing anderperry lately so im glad you're enjoying it :) <3

Sixth—Dare or Dalton

Chapter Summary

Neil gets delivered some rough news, so Charlie tries his best to make his friend feel better.

Chapter Notes

CW/ slight derealization (real minor u kinda have to squint to see it) and implications of an abusive household

also! i have decided that i say the word 'stupid' way too much while writing, so the title will be changing to that lmao. the one right now is just one i came up with bc i had to to start writing

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"You're kicking me off the team?!"

Neil had been called to Mr. Levinsky's classroom by his mortal enemy Jeffery Anderson. Well, that was dramatic, but at least before he'd been able to tolerate being around him. Now he wanted to break his nose nearly every time he saw him. Neil was an only child, so he truly didn't know if being a dick was just a regular thing for siblings—he was sure it was, but he was also sure Jeffery was taking it too far. Todd was stabbing himself with pins and falling asleep in Neil's bed right after class. He was losing sleep over how badly this angsty teenager was treating him. Neil never expected his attitude to turn on him too.

"Don't say it like that," Jeffery said, "You don't want to be here either, do you?"

"No, not really," Neil admitted, "But my—my father, if he finds out I got kicked out... Jeffery, *please* don't do this to me."

"What else am I supposed to do?" Jeffery asked back, "You don't show up to practice, you ignore all of your duties as the vice president... Levinsky is getting on my ass, Neil. I'm sorry."

"Oh, yeah? And what's Levinsky gonna do to you? Slap you on the wrist?" Neil ranted angrily, "My father will *kill* me over this. Do you get that? Will literally *kill me*. This is bigger than your responsibilities, this is my *life*."

"I'm sorry," Jeffery repeated, "Maybe Nolan will choose debate for you when you hit high school."

Neil rolled his eyes. Fat chance Nolan was going to sign him up for the extracurricular he'd gotten kicked out of in the sixth grade. He didn't bother hearing anything else Jeffery had to say, none of it was going to be important or helpful. He stormed to his room only thinking about the silver lining of being able to avoid Jeffery forever now. Three more years. Three more years and Jeffery would be gone. Neil could do three more years. He burst into his room and threw himself onto his bed. If he even lived for those three years... His father was gonna have his head, and there was no getting out of that.

"Neil?" Charlie came into the room and shut the door behind him. "You alright?" Neil felt his bed dip at the end and groaned into his pillow. He didn't feel like talking. He was just really, really tired. "What happened, my man?"

"Ask Jeffery Anderson," Neil said snobbily.

Charlie let out a heavy sigh. "Don't know why you dared messin' with him."

"I didn't *want* to," Neil sighed out and got his face out of his pillow. "I was just trying to be an over achiever and you know how that's gonna work out for me? I'm gonna get disowned, murdered, sacrificed to Harvard Medical School—I don't know! I'm in for it, Charlie. I'm *done*. My life is over."

"It's not over," Charlie reassured, "This isn't going to matter to Harvard."

"Maybe not," Neil agreed, "But my father is going to assume it'll become a behavioral pattern or something. God, I'm gonna be put in summer school. I don't know if I can do this."

"Do... what?" Charlie asked.

"Live," Neil said and slammed his face back into his pillow. "What's the point? Am I just destined to be scared of my father for the rest of my life? What kind of doctor is that?" Charlie didn't know how to respond to that, and that only solidified Neil's point in his head. What was the point? He was going to continue going to this stupid boarding school, getting heavily punished for each mistake, then move on to a university he might not even get accepted to, and marry someone he probably didn't even love. He always knew that this was going to be

his life, but when it was still further away, Neil was more optimistic. Now he didn't even know who he was. Who was Neil Perry except the molded clay of his father's washed-up dreams?

"Hey," Charlie said and tapped Neil's leg. "Do you wanna go to the dock tonight? We can invite the boys. Even Cameron! Would that make you feel better?"

Neil put a hand to the back of his neck where his fully-healed gash was. Did he want Charlie to injure him again? Surprisingly, maybe. He turned around on his back and stared up at the ceiling. Finals were soon. Charlie's birthday was next week. He knew this was the time of the school year where the last sliver of his happiness laid. Might as well have taken advantage of it. "Sure. Invite Cameron. He's better."

"Okay," Charlie said, "I will."

Neil didn't remember what else he did for the rest of the day. It was like he blinked and suddenly he was walking in between Charlie and Knox to the edge of Welton's grounds. They were laughing and joking, and even Cameron seemed to be having fun taking a little break. Seeing his friends happy and laid back, Neil was able to smile the tiniest bit. He knew hanging out with them at the docks was fun. When they'd done it in fourth grade, it'd been the best night of Neil's life. Now the best night of Neil's life was Todd's most recent birthday, but the dock night was still a very close second. Talking about Todd, he was shuffling right behind Neil, covered completely in his cloak that he kind of looked like a stalker just following them.

Neil couldn't really remember if Todd had ever snuck out after lights out or not. He had to assume that he had because they all had. Even *Cameron* had done so before, not that he was ever a fan of doing it. Neil fell behind a little bit to walk next to Todd, and whipped his hood off of his head. He hadn't said anything to him about what Jeffery had done, and he wasn't planning on it. He'd told Charlie to keep it under wraps too because he didn't want anyone to worry about him. Especially not Todd. Jeffery was always giving Neil problems, and he didn't want Todd to have to deal with those on top of the problems that he already had from Jeffery.

"Hey!" Todd grabbed his hood and shoved it back over his head. "I'm trying to keep a low profile."

"From who? Us?" Neil asked and then pulled the hood back. "Me?"

"Shut up." Todd mumbled, "It's cold."

"It's Spring."

"It's cold."

"It'll be colder when I push you in the lake for being annoying," Neil said, but it didn't make Todd laugh, so Neil knew something had to up. "Todd, is something wrong?"

"Nothing," Todd answered, but he saw the look on Neil's face and knew he didn't believe him. "Really, it's nothing. I'm just... sad."

"Do you wanna go back?"

"No, I want to stay," Todd insisted, "I'm just... I'm just being weird that's all."

"It's okay to be sad," Neil said, "I just hope I can make you feel better?"

"You can try," Todd smiled, and that's when Neil grabbed his hand and sprinted ahead of all of their friends, tugging Todd onto the dock. All they did on nights like these were chase each other around and be dorks, so Neil got a head start, and soon Todd was freely laughing and Neil felt much, much better. They came up with games that involved trying *not* to fall in the water and games that involved pushing people *into* the water. Thirty minutes in, no one was dry (except Todd), but everyone was happy. Even Cameron was smiling, and he was covered ankle down in mud, which was the most anti-Cameron thing ever.

Charlie, being Charlie, had invented a game he called *Dalton Daily*. He had someone stand at the end of the dock, and he would ask questions that were either about him and things he did or random questions about things he knew about and often told everyone else. He got extremely annoyed when no one listen to the random tidbits he shared trying to assert his intelligence, and he'd finally got the opportunity to get revenge for it. So far, Todd had been the only one not pushed in the lake for not knowing something about Charlie, which didn't surprise Neil. Todd was a very good listener, and he was really good at retaining information. Neil didn't know how he did it, but if you asked Todd what time you'd taken your shoes off on February 13th, he could probably tell you.

"Steven Meeks." Charlie paced back and forth in front of his victim with his arms folded behind his back. "Meeks, Meeks, Meeks." The more he said the name, the more scared Meeks seemed to get. He hadn't been pushed in that many times because he spent a lot of time around Charlie helping the idiot with Latin, but when he *had* been it

was harsh. He had to have flown at least ten feet with the last shove when he had said that Charlie's favorite food was spaghetti. (By the way, Charlie's favorite food was spaghetti *and meatballs*). "Do you happen to know who America's first documented serial killer is?"

"No?" Meeks hesitantly responded.

"Okay, me neither."

"Really?"

"No." And then Charlie pushed forward and tipped Meeks over into the lake. He fell with a crash and resurfaced without his glasses, having to go back under to find them again. Charlie laughed hysterically at him, but once Meeks was back on the dock, he teamed up with Pitts and Knox to shove Charlie into the lake himself. He obnoxiously fell backward and everyone laughed at him as he crashed into the water. "You guys suck. The answer was H.H. Holmes."

"I knew that," Cameron said, "Not because you told me though."

"I did tell you."

"No, you didn't."

"I did."

"Shut up," Cameron insisted, "No you didn't."

"Hey," Knox said and pointed over to Todd. "Todd hasn't fallen in once."

"That's just cause I'm the best at games," Todd responded, but he did slowly slide away from where he had been standing at the edge of the dock. He didn't trust any of his friends, and he had plenty of reasons not to. Any one of them would betray him in a second to get a good laugh out of seeing him soaked in dirty lake water. Neil smirked. He was going to be the one to do it. He slowly stepped toward his friend while Knox was trying to convince everyone that it was unfair that Todd was still completely dry. While he went into a list of reasons, Neil tackled Todd and brought him down into the water. Right before they were submerged he heard Todd scream, "—Neil!"

Neil didn't know why, but when he was under the water, he had a short moment of wanting to stay there. The coldness in his ears gave him a raging headache, but besides that, it was peaceful. He'd learned

his lesson about thick clothes the last time he'd fallen into the lake and almost drowned, so the thin clothes he had chosen to wear floated all magically like he was a drowning prince. He could've stayed there forever, but Todd swam up to him and glared. The moon was full, so Neil could see his face perfectly. His hair was floating and Neil saw parts of his face that he usually hid with his hair all the time, so besides himself, while he was being glared at, he smiled.

Todd grabbed his shoulders and brought them back up to the surface, and sucked in a very large breath. He clutched Neil's shirt. "*Stupid.* You're so unbelievably stupid."

"I love you too, Todd." Neil splashed him in the face with lake water and he got the same treatment in return. "Come on, Toddsie, being wet is more fun."

"I hate wearing wet clothes," Todd responded, "And I hate you."

"I love you, though."

"And I hate you with a raging fire deep in my gut."

"Someone needs a hug."

"Neil, I honestly swear if you come near me *also* wearing wet clothes I'm going to—" Todd definitely should've been running instead of ranting, because by the time he was halfway through that sentence, Neil was already on top of him. "Neil!"

"You *love* me," Neil insisted.

"I hate you," Todd responded, "With a passion."

"You'd be more intimidating if your wet mop of hair wasn't covering your eyes."

"Yeah, wouldn't *that* be nice?" Todd yelled in response, "Like, if it was *dry* maybe?"

"I think *you're* stupid," Neil said and reached up, swiping the wet chunk of hair up and over Todd's head like he had slicked it back. Todd only slicked back his hair during important events, and you know what, Neil wasn't gay, but he wasn't a liar. He loved it when Todd had his hair slicked back. He could admit it in his head and pretend that he didn't think it made him weird, but he would never say it out loud. Todd would judge him and disown him then, but *god* if

Todd didn't look cute with his hair slicked back. Neil paused for a moment with his hand still on Todd's head, causing concern in his friend's face.

"Neil?"

"Sorry," Neil mumbled quickly, "You're just—horrifying to look at."

"No, you!" Todd shouted and dunked Neil's head under the water again. Neil was laughing so hard that his mouth was open and lake water filled it and nearly choked him, but he was still laughing when he resurfaced. Todd was irritated, but he didn't *look* irritated, which meant that he was actually having a good time, and Neil liked that. Neil liked when Todd could have a good time with him and the people he always felt were still, mostly, *Neil's friends*. That wasn't true, of course, but Todd let that year at Welton they'd all had without him have more power over him than it oughta have. Neil was smiling, happy to see Todd happy, but suddenly Todd was grabbing his wrist and paddling further away from the dock, where the other boys couldn't hear him ask Neil, "Are you okay?"

"Am I okay?" Neil asked, shocked that this was a question Todd could actually be asking him. Was he okay? He was laughing and messing around just mere seconds ago. "Of course I'm okay. Why wouldn't I be?"

"You just seem like you're trying to distract yourself or something," Todd said, and where Neil thought Todd would begin to realize that his question was ridiculous, his efforts in asking actually solidified. "So?"

Why did Todd Anderson have to know Neil so well? He could hide this from anyone else, even Charlie or Knox, but Todd? Why was it beyond impossible to keep things from Todd? Neil shook some water from his hair and smoothed it back. "Just not too excited to go home. That's all." Well, it wasn't a lie.

"Are *you*..." Neil trailed off and let his eyes wander down to Todd's arm. "... okay?"

"I'm better," Todd answered.

"Hey, secretkeepers!" Charlie shouted from the edge of the dock. "Are you gonna come back and join us or keep whispering?!"

"What we playin'?" Neil shouted behind him.

"Dare or Dalton!"

Neil took a breath and looked back at Todd. "You wanna go see what *that* means?"

Todd smiled. "I don't believe we have a choice."

Neil wouldn't be able to recite the rules of 'Dare or Dalton' if he tried. It was a confusing mess of a game where Neil had ended up with a bleeding toe, Pitts with a deep hairline forehead scratch, and Cameron with a nearly broken pinkie. So safe to say, they were *definitely* playing it another time, but it got later and later and Cameron reminded them all that they should probably head in (if nothing, that boy was a good alarm clock), and they all waited a few seconds to dry off before running back inside. Neil didn't understand how anyone could go to bed while feeling that dirty, but most of his friends headed straight to their rooms, even Charlie, leaving only Neil and Todd. So, of course, they went up to the better showers.

"Hey, Todd," Neil said over his shoulder while wiping himself down with soap. "Dare or Perry?"

"Perry."

"What's my favorite song from Bye Bye Birdie?"

"One last kiss?"

Neil gasped. "Mr. Anderson you have never disrespected me as much as you have right now." He walked over to the stalls and flushed the toilet closest to the showerheads. Neil could tell from Todd's sudden yelp that his water had just turned ice cold. "Wanna go again?"

"I'm good," Todd shivered, his showerhead still not having returned to a decent enough temperature to actually shower. Neil saw this and looked over to his still running showerhead. He ran over and rinsed himself off quickly and then stepped to the side, telling Todd he could stop being a crybaby and use his. Todd took this offer graciously and scurried across the bathroom while Neil tried to find some towels laying around there somewhere. "Who's taking the laundry?"

"You," Neil answered, "I did it last time."

"You mean last *year*," Todd corrected.

"Uh-huh," Neil said, "'So it's your turn."

"Not a chance."

"Fine, let's fight over it."

"Neil, please do not touch me when we're both naked."

"Well, where's the fun in that?"

"Shut up," Todd laughed, and Neil heard another squeak as Todd turned off his showerhead. He held out his hand with a towel in it and Todd walked right by and snatched it, wrapping it around himself as quickly as possible. Neil looked over to the pile of their sopping wet clothes and then back to Todd, who was... interesting to see without a shirt on. Not that the white shirt he'd gone diving in hid much, but without that fabric, Todd was *whoa*. Well, as 'whoa' as a twelve-year-old boy could get anyway. "How about we both do it?"

"No fair!" Neil shouted and stood up, his towel slipping from his outburst. He grabbed it and hoisted it back up. "I did it by myself last time."

"Beggars can't be choosers."

"Stuff it," Neil responded and grabbed the pile of clothes, shoving it into Todd's arms. "Your turn."

"Fine," Todd agreed, "But... you have to tell me what's really wrong."

Neil turned around. "S'nothing, I told you that."

"Neil, I know it's not nothing," Todd said and walked up to his side. Damn Todd Anderson for his emotion radar. He was too good at this. Neil had no idea what he was doing that signalled to Todd there were more reasons he was upset, but he wanted to know. He wanted to take Todd's ability and dissect it to make sure that he could successfully hide his problems. "You never wanna go home, but you never act like this because of it."

"Like what?" Neil asked.

"Like... you're trying too hard to be happy," Todd answered and sat down on the bench, patting the spot beside him. "You can tell me."

Neil sighed and sat down. He knew he could tell Todd, and really he'd tell him if it were anything else, but he didn't want to. He didn't want Todd dealing with Jeffery being mean to him and Neil at the same

time. But if Todd wasn't going to let it go, he might as well. "Jeffery kicked me off the debate team."

"...What?" Todd took a second to answer, probably holding back a scream he knew would get them caught. "No, he didn't."

"He did," Neil confirmed, sniffling and feeling tears building up in his eyes. "I begged him not to. My father's gonna throw a fit about it. I'm dead, Todd. Dead."

"You're not dead," Todd tried to soothe, but it only made Neil angrier.

"You don't know my dad!" He shouted at as high a volume as he could. "He'll lock me in my room. Take me to military camp. I'm terrified. I can't go home."

"You have to go home," Todd said sadly, but then he put a hand on Neil's shoulder. It was uncharacteristically cold, matching the tone of the words Todd had just said to him. "But it's only for a little. Soon enough, you'll be back here."

"Yeah, *here*." Neil sniffled. "Hellton. Just the place I'd run to for comfort."

"I'll be here," Todd said hesitantly, as if he didn't know whether or not that dialogue had crossed a line. He took his hand back and curled it up in his lap. "So, if nothing, you can look forward to seeing me."

"You..." Neil said carefully, chewing on that word like he had no idea what it meant or why he was saying it. However, the sentiment made the nervous ache in his stomach temporarily subside. The thought of coming back and seeing his friends, seeing Todd, was what got Neil through that awful Christmas break. Stands to reason the same would be true for summer.

Todd nervously stuttered, "And Charlie!And Knox, Pitts, Meeks, even Cameron."

When Neil mulled it over in his head, he weighed how he would feel if he never saw them again versus if he never saw Todd again. If his friends disappeared, Neil would surely lose it and fall into a deep, deep hole of loneliness, but if Todd disappeared... Somehow, Neil felt like that was worse, and he felt *bad* for thinking that it felt worse. There was a point he hadn't even known Todd, and he'd gotten through life then, but now it was different. Taking away Todd was like... well, a house that's not on fire doesn't need water and doesn't

notice it when it's around, but when it *is* on fire and suddenly needs it, it's gone. Someone took it away. The house would burn down. Neil was the house, Todd was the water. He'd burn if someone took away his water.

"I have a shirt of yours... under my pillow," Neil admitted after a moment of silence. "Smells like books and rain and it helps calm me down when I'm, well, freaking out."

"Really?" Todd asked.

"Yeah, just like your thing with my blazer," Neil twiddled his thumbs, "It's kinda worn off, though, so... if it's not too much to ask... could I have another? Just for the summer."

Todd was flushed and staring blankly at his friend. Neil didn't exactly know how he was going to react, but at the least he was expecting *some* sort of reaction. Finally, Todd said, "Why my shirt?"

"Cause you're the best," Neil sniffled while looking at the ground, "And I feel the best around you. Always. It'll help remind me that you're a real person I'll have to look forward to seeing."

"But... why me?" Todd asked again, "Knox smells pretty nice. I dunno bout' Charlie."

"How many times do I have to say it? You're my person, Todd," Neil explained, "You're my best friend. If anything is gonna help me, it's the reminder that I have you caring about me."

"Neil..." Todd trailed off and he suddenly seemed very uncomfortable, shifting in every which way. "Yeah, you can." Then he stood up with the pile of clothes and tried to rush out of the bathrooms, but Neil was hot on his heels.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing's wrong," Todd replied, "I'll see you tomorrow."

Then Todd rushed down the hall to the stairs, leaving Neil sitting there to think about what he had done wrong.

Chapter End Notes

i have the next chapter already written ;)) and it is todd's pov ;)) i have decided that the end of each year is gonna be todd's pov

End of Sixth—Aunt Ness

Chapter Summary

Todd reflects on his feelings for Neil and his second year at Welton

Chapter Notes

CW// HOMOPHOBIC SLURS!! Internalized homophobia, homophobic language, self-hating language

TW// mentions of self harm

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Todd Anderson was not gay, and he did not have a crush on Neil Perry.

Todd was, however, invisible to his family and everyone he was related to. When he spent his summers locked up in his room in the lake house, he was sure his extended family would've forgotten there was a second child in that branch of the Anderson family if he never came out of his room. There was nothing interesting about him to remember when Jeffery was already reading at a university level and getting recommendation letters from teachers and principals for who knew what.

But he learned not to care about it... that was until his Aunt Ness decided that she was going to give up on him too.

Vanessa Anderson was a wild card in the Anderson family. She had no husband, no children, and all she did was travel the world, never telling anyone where it was that she went. The only time you could be sure where she might be was during the summers she appeared at the lake house to visit the family. She always brought a bag of gifts for the cousins, full of memorabilia from whatever country she had spent her Winter in, and Todd always got pushed aside and got the bottom of the barrel by the time he reached his aunt's gift.

Still, it didn't matter, because Aunt Ness always had a separate gift for him and Jeffery. Less of a gift and more of a hint to whatever state she was going to kidnap them to for the next week. So Todd was okay with being forgotten and pushed aside by the cousins because he was the one who got to go cross country with awesome Aunt Ness every

summer. But when he woke up one morning to find that his aunt and his brother had already departed and left him behind, suddenly everything started to matter.

He wasn't sure why she had done that, lied to him and left him behind, and he remained unsure until Jeffery was screaming it into his face years later during an argument. He had always figured his aunt had just caught on to the memo that Todd was to be forgotten and left out, but really it had been because she hated him now. Because she thought that Todd was a faggot.

Vanessa Anderson was a celibate, Catholic woman, who didn't even want to be *near* a nephew that could've been a fag. His parents had apparently told her about when he had gotten in trouble for sneaking away with another boy to eat his lunch in a secret place. Obviously, she had not taken to it kindly, not even being decent enough to tell Todd she was no longer going to be taking him anywhere. Instead, she just pretended like everything was okay and let him figure it out when he woke up all on his lonesome the next morning.

Once again, this wasn't something he considered a possibility until his brother was yelling it at him in an argument *he* had totally caused. Todd wasn't on good terms with his aunt, but he would still want to visit her if she had gotten hurt, and that's what had happened. Aunt Ness had gotten into an accident that had hospitalized her, and Jeffery had left school for a week to go and visit her. Todd hadn't noticed his brother's absence, let alone why he was even gone, and the only reason he had ever found out was because he had a letter delivered to him at Welton from Aunt Ness.

It wasn't a nice letter by any means. All it did was call Todd a sinner and ungrateful for not coming to visit her while she was severely injured in the hospital, but if he had known, he *would've* gone. But he didn't know... because Jeffery hadn't told him. His parents hadn't told him. No one let him know about it until he was being verbally assaulted by a letter he wasn't even sure his aunt could've written.

He was furious, storming right to Jeffery's room and screaming his frustrations at him, where he was met with the realization that everybody in his family didn't just ignore him cause Jeffery was better, but also because they all thought he was a fairy. And Todd was used to people thinking he was a fairy. Really, he was, but this... this was a whole other level. His brother was so sure of it that he seemed to be trying to *convince* Todd that he was, and that all got worse when he brought up Neil.

He didn't like Neil. That was absurd. Neil was his friend, but the second Jeffery made it seem like more than that, Todd became worrisome. He pulled away from Neil. What else was he supposed to do? Neil was too perfect to let anyone ruin his image like that. Todd didn't even know why Neil still bothered with him. He was a lost cause. But Neil still stuck around and Todd couldn't believe it, especially not with the way Todd had been treating him.

Because he did not have a crush on Neil Perry, and he was determined to prove it.

They had always been touchy with one another, but Todd stopped letting it happen. He stopped letting Neil tackle him and he absolutely stopped letting Neil touch him in any way that wasn't necessary. So basically Charlie's suggestion of spin the bottle was his worst nightmare because he didn't want to kiss any of his friends *but* Neil. No, he didn't *want* to, but he wouldn't have minded. If it had to be someone, if his first kiss was going to be a boy, he'd have liked it to be Neil Perry.

But he couldn't deny the weight in the pit of the stomach when he saw Neil kiss Pitts. It wasn't so bad, but it made Todd realize that he had kissed Knox with way more emotion than he had Pitts. Todd saw the stupid string of spit that held them together falling onto Neil's lip and he saw that they kissed longer than a second, and he hated how jealous he felt. He hated that it made him mad at Neil. He hated that he wanted to kiss Neil, so he shoved Neil's hands off of him and kicked the bottle when it was about to land on him.

Neil's second kiss *should've* been Todd. It should've, but he got too full of himself and kicked an empty, glass root beer bottle. He didn't know what he was trying to prove. Maybe that he wouldn't care if he didn't get to kiss Neil, but suddenly he cared a lot. He cared so much, wanted Neil to be his first kiss so bad, he put his thumb over Meeks' lips when it was finally his turn. Luckily Neil had the same sentiment. He gave Todd what he wanted, and Todd was ecstatic.

But not because he had a crush on Neil Perry. He could just imagine it going over a lot better when he was being made fun of for kissing a boy if it had been Neil. Because Neil was perfect.

No one had ever woken Todd up early on his birthday, not until Neil. Todd really hadn't expected Neil to climb into his bed with him because he was being so stubborn, he hadn't expected himself to make up some stupid excuse so he could roll over and be face-to-face with

his best friend, and he sure hadn't expected to wake up minutes before Neil and spend that time staring at his face and how peaceful he looked when he slept.

Neil put more effort into celebrating Todd's birthday than anyone ever had, and for once Todd felt worthy of it. When Neil whipped out two tickets for Bye Bye Birdie with the largest smile on his face, how could Todd think he was anything *but* worthy? Bye Bye Birdie became a special thing to him because it made Neil happy. It made Neil's eyes light up, made him excited and jumpy, made him energetic and singing tidbits of songs, and Todd loved that. He loved anything that could make Neil that happy. He loved when Neil was happy... because it made him happy.

He became starstruck, however, when Neil revealed the insane fact that he knew the girl who had been playing the female lead. That only got worse when her eccentric costar decided to insert himself into their conversation. Todd could admit (well, in his head at least) that the guy who was playing Conrad Birdie was downright cute. He was frozen in front of the boy, and it only got worse when the guy playing Albert Peterson joined the mix too. Todd saw the subtle touches, he knew they had to be together, and he was astounded. People could do that? In public? With no one yelling at them? Todd *was* straight, but it made him think that maybe things he thought weren't possible... well, that they were possible.

It had been his best birthday thus far. All because of Neil, and he loved Neil because of it. But he didn't have a crush on Neil Perry.

Really, he didn't. Neil was just a comfort to him. Somehow when he was anxious about whatever, remembering that someone like Neil cared about him was calming and grounding. That was why he stole Neil's blazer before Christmas break. Christmas time was always a good time to remember that his family often forgot about him, and it always got him down. Jeffery got everything he ever put on his Christmas list, and Todd got... something. It was like his parents spent all their budget on Jeff's presents and used what they had left to buy however much they could from the nearest thrift store for Todd, but it was okay because at the end of the day he could go up to his room, grab Neil's jacket, and remember that there was one person out there who really cared about him.

Jeffery finding out had been an accident. Todd couldn't have known that he was going to come in during the early hours of the morning and wake him up to tell him that he and their parents were going to

be off somewhere doing something. Neil's blazer had its place next to Todd's pillow, but sometimes in his sleep he would reach up and clutch it, and that's what had happened the unfortunate morning Jeffery had decided to walk in. Todd tried his best to explain that it wasn't anything like *that,* but Jeffery didn't believe him. He never did. However, he *did* promise not to make it a big deal and to not tell mom and dad about it.

Of course, Jeffery only does what's best when everything is working out for him. The second you made him mad, he would stab you in the back. Todd couldn't even remember what him and Jeffery had been fighting about, but it ended with him in a church in the middle of the night confessing his sins to a priest... because Jeffery had gone overboard. He had made up detail after detail about how Todd and Neil were basically the Romeo and Juliet of Welton. He made it seem like in between classes him and Neil were on the roof making out and doing things his Aunt Ness probably didn't even know you could do.

Confessing for Todd wasn't as much that as it was the priest trying to guilt him into saying something horrid about Neil. The strategy that was being employed was trying to make Todd hate Neil for doing *this* to him and for making him what he was, but he wasn't *anything*, and if he was, it sure wasn't Neil's fault. Todd told the priest that everything Jeffery had said was a lie and none of it was real, that Neil was just his best friend, but as usual, absolutely no one believed him, and he was only let out because of his insistent refusal to 'admit the truth.' His parents did the next best thing and locked him in his room, and he didn't know what to do. He was crying and he barely knew why.

So he went to Neil's blazer, the scent of Neil rolling around in the grass early in the morning before class just to get a giggle out of Todd, for comfort. He hadn't meant to stab himself with Neil's honor roll pin and he hadn't meant for it to feel good. He sure hadn't meant to turn it into a habit and he sure as *hell* hadn't meant for Neil to find out. It wasn't his fault that Neil was a cute little weirdo who loved to bite him. Todd thought it was adorable, so he never stopped Neil, just vaguely pretended that it annoyed him, but Neil always bit his *shoulder*. He wasn't expecting Neil to bite the exact place he had first gotten poked and he wasn't prepared to hide his sound of pain.

Neil was mad at him. So, so mad at him, but he didn't abandon Todd. He stayed right there, put bandaids on Todd's wounds, and lulled Todd to sleep with the list of things that made Neil think of him. Todd only got angrier at himself. He had the audacity to hurt himself when Neil cared about him? He was pathetic, ridiculous... and it was a

horrible loophole for him to discover. He really, really wanted to stop because it made Neil upset, and he hated making Neil upset, but then again if he did it, he thought he deserved it because he *had* made Neil upset. It was a dangerous cycle. One that left Todd sad for no reason at most hours of the day.

But it wasn't because he had a crush on Neil Perry.

Seriously, he didn't. The only reason he had let Charlie drag him out in the middle of the night was because the rest of the boys were going. He was planning to hide in the back and pretend he wasn't even there, but of course Neil didn't let him. He ripped away his shield and made Todd participate, and eventually Todd did. His least favorite thing was being in wet clothes, but Neil was laughing so hard when they broke the surface after falling in, he couldn't bring himself to be mad at him. He pretended to be, but as always, it was hard to be anything but happy when Neil Perry was smiling.

But Todd got jittery when Neil stared at him because he knew what he saw in that stare. He saw admiration and love and a bunch of other things he didn't think he deserved to have Neil looking at him with. Neil was looking at him like he was the only thing that mattered, the only thing that existed, and everyone had always looked at him like the opposite of that. It gave Todd a rustling feeling in the pit of his stomach. One that he was familiar with. He didn't call it butterflies. In fact, he *refused* to call it butterflies. Instead, he referred to it as an annoying hoard of rage-filled moths. Neil constantly gave him the buzzing rage of angry moths, so he snapped Neil out of that stare and tried to forget about it.

Then his intuition that something was wrong with Neil was confirmed when Neil broke down about a bunch of things Todd had no idea how to help with. And he really *did* want to help, but there was nothing he could do except sit there with his friend while he cried. He hadn't planned to be shitty and run away at the mention that Neil had taken one of his shirts for the same reason Todd had taken his blazer. And he sure hadn't planned to be digging through his wardrobe the next day trying to decide what shirt would be appropriate to give Neil next. He should've been disgusted that Neil not only already had one of his shirts, but that he wanted another one, but he wasn't.

However, it wasn't because he had a crush on Neil Perry.

While he was searching, Neil walked in behind him. Todd heard the soft shuffle of his footsteps and knew exactly who it was before he

started talking. "I'm sorry if I made you mad."

Todd turned around quickly with the word *shit* on his mind. His running away had made Neil think he was mad. "I'm not mad."

"Well, I'm sorry anyway," Neil replied. He looked over Todd's shoulder. "What are you doing?"

"What you asked me tuh," Todd said like it was glaringly obvious. "I'm picking a shirt."

"You don't hafta..." Neil trailed off, "You don't hafta pick a specific one. You don't even gotta give me one."

"No, I'm going to."

But then suddenly Neil was sniffling and falling back onto Knox's bed behind him, crying. Todd was next to him in a second, notably resisting the urge to grab his hand. "Sorry." Neil wiped under his eye and let out an empty laugh at himself. "I'm just gonna really miss you."

There they were... the angry moths. Neil couldn't say that to him. It was normal to miss your friends over the summer, but to *really* miss them? That had to be crossing some sort of line. A line that his Aunt Ness had probably drawn herself, but Todd still said, "You too."

"Like so much." Neil sniffled again. "I'm gonna miss you so much."

"Why?" Todd hadn't actually expected to say it out loud, but it was something he was constantly wondering. Neil was so amazingly beautiful, yet it was *Todd* he chose to spend his time around. Todd wasn't worthy of having Neil care about him like that. He really wasn't. He was annoying and dumb and... and everyone thought he was a fag. Neil didn't need to be spending his time around someone like that. He deserved something way, way better than Todd Anderson.

"Because..." Neil wiped his nose. "I have no idea how I'm gonna deal with this without you."

"Come on, Neil," Todd tried, "It'll be okay." He couldn't bring himself to believe that, so he just had to hope that Neil would show up for the next school year.

"Not without you."

"Why *me*?" Todd asked despite himself. He couldn't believe he was *mad* right then, but he was. Neil was *perfect* and there he was crying over someone like Todd. If he was going to cry over missing anything, it should've been something better than Todd. "I'm not worth crying over."

Neil looked him right in the eye, and Todd recognized the look. It was the look he'd gotten the night before in the lake. The look that *he* was the perfect one and not Neil. That he was anything more than an annoying burden. Neil very seriously put his hands on both Todd's shoulders and didn't let him look away. "You're worth everything."

Suddenly, Todd started crying too... because someone as amazing as Neil... not even *someone* as amazing as Neil, but just *Neil*... he thought Todd was everything. He cared about Todd. He picked him over his brother when on one else in his life had ever done that, not even his own family, and no matter how many times Todd said he didn't deserve him, Neil never let up. Neil was perfect and he chose to spend his time with Todd, so Todd kept crying. He kept crying as the angry moths bloomed into butterflies and Neil pulled him into a hug.

He kept crying because... because... *fuck*.

Because he had a crush on Neil Perry.

Chapter End Notes

hehe todd has admitted. i hope ur all ready for oblivious neil

Also!!! I love ur comments they are adorable and I absolutely love you all :) <3

Seventh—Mira Lancaster

Chapter Summary

Neil's summer causes a rift between him and Todd.

Chapter Notes

CW// angst?? do i need to content warning angst??

TW// self-harm mention, suicidal ideology mention

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil's summer was not as horrible as he thought it was going to be. Well, it was still really, *really* bad, but just a smidge better than what Neil expected. His father told him that he could make up for his incredibly disappointing debate performance by joining about... seventy-million other extracurricular activities. He was gonna be rowing, playing soccer, shadowing the school annual (the only one he was actually excited for), and too many other things that his brain couldn't even remember. Mr. Nolan had made him his own personalized timetable and when he was handed it at the end of orientation he saw about three things on there that he had forgotten he'd signed up for. Somehow, his father expected him to do all this and keep up with the advanced classes he was now in due to two months of rigorous summer school, and he was stressed before the first day of school had even begun.

But it was okay. Maybe. Well, somewhere deep in there Neil could at least find a reason that it could be okay. His parents disappeared every weekend of the summer, leaving Neil by his lonesome in their house, allowing him to do whatever he wanted to do. He read four screenplays by the second weekend of free time when he got a call on his home phone. He didn't know who expected to hear from when he picked up, but it wasn't Avery. He didn't think she would ever dare try to call the house again after what had happened when he was little, but she did, indeed, dare. She was just lucky it was Neil who picked up the phone.

She invited him to come with her to her drama club and Neil... well, Neil was absolutely hyped, so his boring weekends of reading whatever plays he could scrounge up from his mother's library turned into watching improv and sometimes even *participating*. It was his best

summer thus far. The drama club had six people in it, including Neil. There was Avery and her little brother Sam (a year younger than Neil, he figured that was where Avery learned how to tolerate his annoying, toddler self), Josh and Harley, and then another girl Neil had never met before. Her name was Mira Lancaster, and she went to Henley. Neil recognized her as the girl who had played Kim Macafee in Bye Bye Birdie the last year, but he kept his praise and compliments held back.

Partly because he didn't want to reveal to everyone that he was insanely obsessed with that night he had seen the play because it had been one of the best nights ever. Mostly because Mira was really, *really* pretty. Certain girls had never really caught Neil's attention before, but Mira, who was one year older than him, was the apple to his eye for all the weekends he was sneaking off to engage in his secret dream. He wasn't sure he actually liked her until they performed a scene together, and Neil realized she was all he could think about for the rest of the day. He wasn't subtle—he was *never* good at being subtle—and eventually she noticed.

But it went better than he had expected, by the end of the first month of summer—Neil had a girlfriend!

And he didn't even have to keep her a secret. He experimentally told his mother, and she was happy for him and said that his father surely would've been too, and he was! Everything turned around for him, and while he was still secretly sneaking out on weekends, Mira was allowed to come over during certain hours on certain weekdays. She had dinner with his family, got the approval of his father, and even kissed Neil on his porch when they were saying goodbye. He never expected something like that to happen, but once it had happened, he *had* expected to be vigorously interrogated by Charlie as soon as he said the words *I have a girlfriend.*

Knox and Meeks stood behind Charlie, who was holding their desk lamp in his hand. The curtains had been drawn and it was the only light in the room, blinding Neil, who was sitting, strapped to the chair by Meeks' belt, across from Charlie. He didn't know why the belt was necessary... or the darkness, but he had learned not to question his friends anymore. He would never get an answer. Charlie squinted, acting the most suspicious out of all three of them. Knox and Meeks were asking *regular* questions. The stuff seventh graders would want to know about each other's relationships, but Charlie was being weird, acting like Mira was an alibi to a mass murder Neil had committed over the summer.

"And what was her last name again?" Charlie asked.

"Lancaster," Neil said, beyond irritated. "How was your summer, Charlie?"

"Excrement."

"...huh?"

"Shit, Neil. It was shit." Charlie leaned back in the chair, but kept the light as close to Neil's face as he could. "Maya Lancaster. How'd you meet again?"

"*Mira*," Neil corrected, "And for the love of god, Charlie, I told you. The drama club my old babysitter invited me to."

"I don't know." Charlie looked over his shoulder to his right and left hand men. "It seems too convenient to me. What do you guys think?"

"I think that Neil has a girlfriend," Knox said plainly, "Before any of us, and I'm upset."

Charlie looked hurt. "Upset? Wh—wh—why are you upset?"

Knox pinched Charlie on the shoulder really hard. "Because I'm *upset*, Charlie."

"Oh, yeah... yeah!" Charlie said and then turned back around to face Neil with a different expression on his face. "I am upset also."

Neil and Meeks shared a 'yeah, what the hell is wrong with those two' look, but then Neil sighed. "I'm gonna call her tonight if you wanna come listen, freak."

"I'd love to," Charlie accepted quickly, "Boys, open the curtains. This session is done."

Meeks rolled his eyes, but still followed Charlie's orders and let the natural daylight leak in. Neil swiped the lamp from Charlie, turning it off and setting it back wherever it was supposed to go. Meeks crossed his arms and looked at their suspect. "So... what base we talking?"

"Meeks!" Neil yelled in annoyance.

"My man just wants to know if you've copped a feel," Charlie said and put a hand on Meeks' shoulder.

"Can you please *not* talk about my girlfriend like that?"

"Whoa, *girlfriend*?" The boys turned around to see Pitts at the door with Todd standing right behind them. They walked in and tried not to cast questioning glances over the interrogation set up that was still apparent in the middle of the room. Neil had felt pretty confident telling everyone about his girlfriend. That was until Todd walked in. Because he felt horrible. He'd made this whole big deal about not being able to make it through the summer without him, and then he had barely *thought* about him all summer. It was supposed to be bros before—okay, well, not *that*, but Neil had made a deal with himself to always prioritize Todd over anybody else. No! Not just Todd. All of his friends. Over his family, over any girl, over *anyone*, and one girl kisses him and he forgets all about of it. He was a piece of crap.

"Yup!" Charlie popped the 'p' and turned Neil around to face his other friends, putting his hands proudly on his shoulders like he was his son who had just won his first baseball game or something. "You heard it right, Pittsie. Girlfriend. Our boy here has got one."

"He does?" Todd asked, looking right at Neil, and Neil felt his resolve crumble. Neil forgot all about the fact there was no possible way Todd could've known that Neil had forgotten about him all summer, and immediately jumped to the assumption that *that's* why Todd looked like a betrayed, broken, abandoned puppy. Neil didn't want to keep looking into his eyes because it made him feel worse by the moment, but he couldn't look away. He wanted to know how in the hell he had forgotten Todd, and he thought maybe he would find his answer in the guilt he deserved. He stood up, ignoring any other questions from the rest of his friends, grabbed Todd's wrist, and dragged him out of the room and down the hall to some random location. Todd broke free from Neil's grasp and shook it off like it was an infection. "You do?"

Then it hit Neil that Todd couldn't have known that he had forgot about him, and he was filled with the new confusion of why Todd was upset. He, of course, still felt absolutely horrid about what he had done, but that was replaced with the concern of why Todd was sad because he suddenly didn't know why. "Yeah, I do. What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong!" Todd said in an accusing tone, but then took it back by cowering and looking down at the ground. "Nothing's wrong. Just sounds like you had a good summer after all."

"And that makes you mad?"

Todd whipped his head back up. "I'm not mad."

"You seem... are you alright?"

"I'm *fine*, Neil," Todd accentuated, but Neil knew when his best friend was not fine, and right then was one of those times. Todd, of course, knew what he was thinking, so he said again, "I'm fine."

"You're not," Neil asserted, "And you can tell me why."

"There's nothing to tell," Todd said, "So leave it alone." He tried to walk away but Neil grabbed his arm and held him back.

"I'm not gonna leave it alone," Neil said like Todd had suggested he should try to fly to the moon.

But then Todd pulled out an even worse broken puppy-dog look. One that got Neil to crumble and give Todd absolutely anything he wanted. He held it on his face for a few moments and let it really sink into Neil's soul and then said quietly, "*Please*."

Neil let go of Todd's wrist, but he didn't want to. He didn't want to let Todd walk away. He wanted to hold Todd in that hallway forever until he knew exactly what was wrong and how to fix it because he hated when Todd was upset. And he hated when Todd was so upset about something that he refused to tell Neil about because then that meant it was Neil's fault, and it was something bad. Todd tried to walk away, but him and Neil were locked in a competition of seeing whose stare was more broken. Neil wanted to grab onto Todd again and never let him leave, remembering suddenly the flood of emotions he had felt before summer, the feeling of needing Todd every second of every day, and it was impossible to think that was something that he had forgotten. However, he didn't.

Instead he said, "Can I tell you something?"

Todd visibly swallowed—Neil even heard it—and hesitantly said, "Sure."

"I love you," Neil said, "Like, *seriously* love you."

"O—Okay?"

He kept holding back the urge to wrap Todd in a hug. "And if you ever, *ever* feel like I love something else more than you—even my bed! —please slap me, okay?" He saw Todd's skeptical look and kept going.

"I'm serious, Todd! I think I've made it quite clear you're everything to me, and I promise that is not something that's gonna change. No matter what. Not even if you stabbed me in the heart."

"Okay, you can stop now," Todd said in a rushed jumble of words. "Like, seriously, please stop."

"Promise me that you believe me," Neil demanded, "Then I'll stop."

"I can't—" Todd tried to say and then he cut himself off and took a very shaky breath. "I can't promise you that, Neil."

"What can I do to make you believe me?"

"I don't think there's anything you can do," Todd said, "And it's—that's fine. I shouldn't... I'm not... there isn't—ugh! You can care about things more than me, alright? I'm not gonna shatter if you don't. I—I'm fine! Stop babying me!"

"I'm not *babying* you—"

"Yes you are!" Todd argued, "You're treating me like I'm gonna go slit my wrists if I don't have all your attention."

"Can I see your arm, Todd?" Neil suddenly asked.

Surprisingly, Todd held out both his arms and rolled his sleeves up all the way, turning them around in a very grand show of proving that there were no new marks or cuts. He angrily pulled his sleeves down. "*See*? I don't need you, Neil. I'm not gonna go jump off a building because you don't try to go all homo on me for two seconds. In fact, maybe you should just leave me alone for a little while."

"Go all homo—what?" Neil asked, "Todd, what are you... what? How did this..."

"Go make out with your girlfriend or something, Neil," Todd said and tried to walk away, but Neil caught his wrist again. Todd tried tugging it away. "Let go of me."

"Stop being a prick and *then* I'll let go of you."

"I'm not being a prick."

"Yes the fuck you are," Neil said angrily, "I don't know what's gotten into you, but I'm not gonna allow it to make you so stupid anymore. I know you, Todd. This isn't you. Stop being an asshole."

"Damn it, Neil," Todd whined, "I hate being your friend."

"Oh yeah? Why's that?"

"Because you refuse to stop trying!" Todd finally released himself of Neil's grip. "I want you to give up on me and let me storm off and you won't let me! Even when I'm being the definition of a jerk!"

"Of course not!" Neil yelled, "I care about you!"

"Stop caring about me!" Todd screamed back, and Neil saw tears brimming in his eyes. He had no idea why Todd was acting like this. There wasn't a single reason he could think of, but it was breaking him. "Just *stop it*, Neil! Please!"

"No," Neil said.

"What do you mean, *no*?"

"I mean *no!*" Neil took a breath and looked at his friend. He was lucky there was no one in the hallway. "I'm gonna let you leave and keep being annoying, Todd, but I'm never gonna stop caring about you. When you're ready to talk about whatever is going on, please let me know. I love you." Then Neil turned around and walked back down the hallway to his room, wondering how his the first day back at Welton could somehow be worse than the first day of summer.

Chapter End Notes

> genuinely wrote that whole ‘what do u mean no’ thing as an accident but u know prob happens a lot
>
> once again COMMENTS!! i love ALL of u you ALL make me smile i check my email daily now just to see if anyone’s commented and that’s a good habit for me to have so I LOVE U ALL

Seventh—In fact, Neil

Chapter Summary

> Neil's day passes by quickly as he finds more and more reasons to freak out.

Chapter Notes

> CW// … inappropriate implications, gonna continue content warning angst, implications of homophobia, derealization
>
> TW!!// explicit mentions of self harm, self-hating language

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"What is the difference between a blue moon and a new moon?" Knox was holding up two different papers and looking between them multiple times, directing his question to Neil, who was sitting across from him tapping his pencil repeatedly against their shared desk. Knox was sort of surprised that the pencil, nor the table, hadn't broken yet. Neil had been doing that since they had started their project, and it would've annoyed Knox if Neil wasn't so good at keeping a constant rhythm. What annoyed Knox was the fact that his partner hadn't contributed a single thought to their project that was due at the end of class the next day. He slammed his fist on the table. "Neil!"

"What?!" Neil complained like he had any right to be annoyed. His eyes were on Charlie and Todd, who were sitting too close and talking too much. Well, from a project standpoint. Yeah. Talking too much to be getting anything done with their project. Not talking too much to one another when Todd hadn't said a word to Neil in nearly two weeks. Definitely not that. Not at all. And definitely not because Todd had chosen Charlie to be his partner on the project, leaving Neil, Knox, *and* Charlie confused. Neil looked at the two photos in Knox's hand. "I don't know."

Neil knew. Todd had taken an astronomy class last year, and he loved showing Neil his book full of constellations and moon phases, but Neil didn't actually know what Knox was asking him. He barely even knew what they were supposed to be doing. How could he? Charlie had his arm around Todd. Todd had to have hated that, but he wasn't saying anything. Neil wanted him to say something. He didn't let Charlie touch him like that. He let Neil touch him like that. Neil barely

realized his fist was clenching until Knox was pulling his fingers apart and flattening his sweaty hand on the table.

"Neil, I really don't want to fail the first project of the year," Knox said, "So can I therapize you later and can you tell me the difference between a blue and new moon now?"

"Yeah, sorry." Neil shook the scowl off of his face, but it was hard. Todd hadn't looked at him, spoken to him, done anything to him in too long. How had he ignored Todd for that two weeks in fifth grade? This was impossible. This was torture. Charlie had told him to leave Todd alone for a bit, Mira had said the same thing, but that didn't feel right. Leave Todd alone? When he was still mad at Neil? No way. It was on the forefront of his mind as he helped finish up the science project because Charlie still had his arm around Todd. It was still there when he was on the phone later that night talking to his girlfriend.

"Neil, he'll talk to you soon enough," She said. Her voice sounded kind of like Todd's when she was comforting him. No. He was not about to start comparing his girlfriend to Todd. "You should just leave it alone."

"I don't want to leave it alone." Neil twirled the phone cord in his fingers. "I *can't* leave it alone."

"Well, you should," Mira insisted, "Sounds like everyone and their mothers want you to. Even Todd. Are you really going to ignore everyone *and* their mothers?"

Neil smiled the tiniest bit. "Everyone? Sure. But not their mothers, I suppose."

"Yeah, the mothers didn't do anything to do you."

Neil knew his poor girlfriend was annoyed with him and how much he had been bringing up Todd, which had been in every phone call since the first day of school, and they were a *month* into school. But he couldn't let it go. He was done with being separated from Todd, especially not when Todd was mad at him and he didn't know why. Not when the last words Todd had said to him were a request for Neil to give up on him and leave him in the dust. Neil was never going to leave Todd in the dust, but he worried if he bothered Todd too much, Todd would eventually leave *him*. Because he knew his friend. He knew his friend didn't know what he deserved, and he knew that he would go far to prevent Neil from coming back to him.

Despite her obvious annoyance, Neil refused to stop talking about Todd to Mira. She eventually made up some sort of excuse to hang up and left Neil leaning against the wall next to the phone with a hand in his hair. There wasn't one aspect about his life right then that wasn't stressful. Usually, Todd was the only constant, but now he wasn't. Neil didn't like how seemingly pathetic he had become not being able to function properly without Todd. How dependent was he? Maybe Todd was right to distance himself from Neil. But that didn't mean Neil liked it.

"Hey, my man." Charlie appeared with a toothpick between his teeth, setting a hand on his friend's shoulder. Neil shoved him off, having been mad at him lately. He'd been spending a lot of time around Todd, and since Neil couldn't do that himself, it irritated him. Charlie even *knew* how upset Neil was about the whole thing, infuriating him more. Charlie held his hands up. "What's up with the hostility, Neil?"

"You *know* what's up with the hostility," Neil spat at him.

"I actually don't," Charlie responded, "And I'm not sure I wanna be sleeping across from someone who sounds like he wants to murder me."

"Then switch with Knox," Neil said and tried to walk away, "I'm sure Todd would like it."

"Oh." Charlie caught Neil's shoulder and pulled him back from his attempt at angrily storming away. "That's what's up?"

"No," Neil said, "Leave me alone." He tried to shrug Charlie off of him, but Charlie had an unnaturally strong grip, and it was kind of unsettling.
"Charlie."

"That's my name," Charlie said.

"I hate you," Neil said, "Let go of me. I've got homework."

"Study group tonight?" Charlie let go of Neil, but his question was so out of pocket that Neil was actually frozen in confusion for a minute. Charlie perked up an eyebrow. "What?"

"Study group?" Neil asked, "You think I wanna do *study group* with you right now?"

"Neil, I didn't lock Todd in a dungeon and tell him he's not allowed to

talk to you," Charlie said, "He's literally in his room right now probably doing History or something. Stop acting like a dick."

"I'm not acting like a—" Neil cut himself off with a sigh, not even bothering to finish his sentence because he *was* acting like a dick. He was being a dick and a half, actually. "He's mad at me, Charlie, and I don't know what to do."

"Go talk to him if you're that worried about it," Charlie said, "You're not getting anywhere standing here freaking out about it, and Maya is clearly up to her eyes with this. She probably thinks you like Todd more than her."

Neil held back the *I do* on his tongue, biting his bottom lip and instead correcting Charlie, who *refused* to refer to his girlfriend by her actual name... and he did that because he cared about Mira. He liked Mira. He did, he *swore*. She was pretty and... well, she was pretty. Neil thought she was funny too. They got along well, and Neil thought about her quite often. Neil thought about her in English class when they were reading love poetry, but... maybe that was just because they were already dating. Was he thinking about her because he actually liked her? Yes. Yes, he did. Well, he thought he did.

He had thought about her that day they performed the scene together, the day he'd started liking her in the first place. She was so passionate about acting that Neil fell in love with the twinkle in her eyes. Not with her, not just yet, but with that twinkle. The twinkle of her being truly happy doing what she loved, and Neil was happy he was not only there to witness that twinkle, but was part of causing it. He wanted to keep being the reason somebody had a twinkle like that in their eye, and when a pretty girl was that close... well, it'd be impossible not to develop a crush on her, right? *Right*? His feelings were real, he was *sure* they were, but that didn't stop his doubt. Did he actually like her... or did he just latch onto the idea of liking her because of... because of...

No, no, no, no. Neil refused to think about that. Especially not when Charlie was standing right in front of him. Maybe that was another reason he was mad at Charlie right then. He had caused that whole thought process when he—*ugh*. But Neil couldn't blame Charlie for that entirely. It's not that he had done it on purpose. Not like he could've known that Neil was having a hard time sleeping that night, and he definitely couldn't have known that... *okay, Neil. Stop. Shut up. Just shut up.*

Charlie clapped in front of his face, and his face was exactly what Neil did not want to see when he snapped back into it. Charlie raised his eyebrow again. "Did I lose you there for a second?"

"I'm sorry, Charlie," Neil sighed and ran a hand through his hair, a habit that he had picked up from Josh. Josh was a nervous guy, bouncing about every second of every day, but it wasn't so bad when Harley was around. Josh would clutch his boyfriend's hand and dig his nails into his palms and it would keep him from tapping his foot so much that Avery had to yell at him to not. But when Harley wasn't there, Josh's elbows were on his knees and he was bent over running both his hands through his hair and shaking it out. Neil wished he knew what it was that got Josh so anxious, but he tried his best to help when Harley wasn't there. He would sit next to Josh and try to tell him about the radio show he had gotten hooked on that summer, and it sort of helped, but it always ended with Neil somehow mimicking Josh's nervous ticks, and the hair one just hadn't left his system. "I don't like it when Todd's mad at me."

"I know, Neil," Charlie sighed, "Just talk to him. You're getting on my nerves lately."

"I don't want to talk to him," Neil objected.

Charlie groaned. "Well, why *not*? Why do you have to make things so difficult?"

"Well, I—I'm mad at him."

Charlie's eyebrow raises were getting annoying and repetitive. "Really? *You're* mad at *him*? What did he do?"

"What did I do?!" Neil yelled back, "I tried to tell him that Mira isn't gonna get in the way of me and him, and he told me to stop babying him! I tried to tell him that I care about him more than anything and he said he didn't need me! He doesn't... he doesn't *want* to talk to me, and I can't handle that, alright? So I don't wanna talk to him, Charlie. I really don't."

"He wants to talk to you," Charlie said, "I promise you that he does. He's just a lil' hurt right now, alright? It's got nothin' to do with you. Apparently his summer was rough."

"He—He told you that?" Even though Neil had told Todd that if he couldn't tell Neil about his problems that he should feel comfortable telling anyone else—including Charlie—about anything that was

wrong, he was mad that Todd had done just that. Really? He had told Charlie that his summer had been bad and not Neil? All Neil got was yelled at? His fist clenched, but once he noticed he untensed and tried to act like it didn't bother him. He wasn't jealous. He wasn't mad. He *wasn't*.

"Yeah. Jus' that, though. No details," Charlie said, "So try not to take it personal, alright? I've never seen someone admire someone as much as Todd admires you, so calm down. It'll be fine."

Neil kicked the ground. "He *admires* me?"

"He thinks you're the bee's knees, Perry," Charlie said like it was a well-known fact.

"He thinks I'm *perfect*," Neil said mockingly because he could never bring himself to believe that. He was nothing but a stress-filled ball of anxiety that sometimes got good grades. He was the furthest thing from perfect, so he had no idea why Todd continued to insist that he was.

"Oh no," Charlie mimicked his tone with a hint of irony, "Someone thinks you're perfect?" He put the back of his hand to his forehead and leaned against Neil like he was about to dramatically pass out. "How will you continue on?"

"Shut up." Neil shoved Charlie off of him and straightened his tie. He had taken to wearing Welton ties everyday now because he knew he was going to have to when he hit high school, so he might as well have started getting used to it. He hated collared shirts and ties. He hated having that kind of restricting feeling around his neck, but as with everything else he hated, he had to learn how to deal with it. However, he was never going to learn to deal with Charlie Dalton being Charlie Dalton. Not as long as he could still punch him in the teeth. "Charlie..."

Charlie set his chin on Neil's shoulder. "What can I do you for?"

Neil's words died and revived themselves in his mouth many times before he finally figured out what he was even trying to say. He wanted to ask Charlie if he really did like his girlfriend. If anyone knew anything about Neil's phony feelings, it would probably be Charlie. Charlie was really good at telling Neil when he was bullshitting himself, but that would then require telling Charlie the possible reason he thought he could be bullshitting himself, and he hadn't thought about *that* since it had happened. He wanted to forget

about it, lock it away in a closet with the rest of his skeletons, and never think about it again, but Neil knew that wasn't how he should've dealt with problems.

Charlie poked Neil's cheek. "... Neil?"

"I like women." Okay, well... Neil had figured out what he wanted to say, but when he had tried to say it, it had come out all wrong.

Charlie pulled away and stared at his friend blankly. "Me too. And?"

"Just women."

"Never said you didn't, buddy."

"So you agree?"

"What?"

"That I'm—that I like girls?"

"Sure, Neil."

"And you like girls?"

"I do." Charlie said, but he was becoming more sketched out by the second by Neil's behavior, and Neil didn't blame him. He was being a freak. "In fact, Neil, I like more than just girls. I like everybody. In *fact,* Neil, I don't care whether it's a girl or boy. I just like people."

Neil was at a loss for words, so all he said was. "Really?"

"Really," Charlie confirmed, "So... what are we doing right now?"

"I was just making sure you were aware that I like women."

"I knew that, yes." Charlie squinted and leaned forward toward Neil, finally catching on to what Neil might've been being such a little freak about. "Is there something that would make me believe otherwise?"

"No!" Neil denied immediately, "Not at all!" Neil needed go to sleep or something because everything he was doing and saying was making less and less sense, and it wasn't even just about Todd anymore. Sure, Todd was the biggest problem he was facing, but now he was suddenly standing in the middle of the hallway asserting his masculinity to prove that the attraction he had to a girl he was literally dating was real. He attributed it to the stress he was going

through from all the *everything* his father had made him sign up for. Who knew six classes, seven extracurriculars, a girlfriend, an unhealthy attachment to his best friend, and a wavering sexuality could cause a twelve-year-old boy so much stress?

He was straight, but... Neil had just *very* recently discovered it wasn't just one way or the other, so suddenly on top of not even knowing if he *did* like girls, he had to worry about the fact that even if he did, that didn't completely rule out the possibility of him being attracted to boys too. He thought he was sure he didn't because he didn't like Todd, and if he liked boys, he would've one-hundred percent liked Todd, but then again, Charlie...

"I heard you the very last night of school." Well, alright. Neil had meant to bring it up, but not that blatantly. Charlie's eyes widened and he took a single step away from Neil.

"You heard me..." Charlie trailed off and made a crude motion with his hand. Neil shivered in disgust, but still nodded. "Oh. I'm... what the hell is this conversation about right now? I thought we were talking about Todd."

"My brain is a clusterfuck, Charlie," Neil tried to explain, but he hardly knew himself how or why he was drifting from subject to subject. "Todd's mad at me, and I talk about it so much I'm annoying my girlfriend, and I'm not actually sure if I like her or if I'm just *convincing* myself that I like her because I heard you the last night of school and I—" Neil slapped a hand over his mouth. Would he ever learn how to stop talking?

Charlie's eyebrow raises were taunting at this point. "You what?"

"I did nothing." Neil crossed his arms over his chest. "I threw up. That's what I did."

"You like your girlfriend, Neil," Charlie concluded, "But... you're in denial about something else. And it involves me. Are you in love with me?"

Neil slapped him in the face. "I have standards."

"Then what is it?"

"I don't want to say... it's embarrassing."

Then suddenly Charlie Dalton was a genius with a PhD in the

psychology of Neil Perry. His mouth dropped open and he turned slowly to Neil. "You did it too!"

"Shut up!" Neil shouted immediately, "No I—No I didn't!"

Charlie poked Neil's chest. "You find me attractive."

Neil could've broken Charlie's finger. "I find you repulsive."

"Mhm." Charlie was *too* convinced, but it's not like he was wrong. Neil had let too much truth slip, and even if that's what he had been trying to do in the first place, he was disgusted with himself. Because he has admitted it. Charlie had just told him that *he* liked boys, and Neil barely cared, but still at the implication that he himself liked boys, Neil wanted to curl up into a hole and die. His father would never... this was bad. This was really bad.

Charlie left it alone when he saw the look of dread on Neil's face, and left his friend to run off to the showers, where he planned to try to wash off these horrid thoughts. It didn't work. Hot or cold, a shower just wasn't helping him. What ended up helping him was when he found what he thought to be an according punishment. Every time he had a non-platonic thought about another boy—Charlie or otherwise—he would scratch himself until he bled. By the time he was done in the shower, he had three different patches of scratched skin, irritated by shower water. It was when he was drying his hair off in the mirror that he realized what this was. This was exactly what he'd gotten mad at Todd for doing, and that made him feel all the worse. He thought he deserved it, but he also knew it was something that would make Todd even more upset with Neil than he already was.

So that's what finally encouraged Neil to make the trip to Todd's room and actually enter—not stand outside the door and ghost a knock only to wimp out like he had been doing for the past week. He didn't know what he was freaking out about anymore. Nothing felt real to him, and he barely remembered where he was, let alone what he was supposed to be stressing about. All he knew was that he needed to be with someone right then, and that someone needed to be Todd. Todd was sitting cross-legged on his bed reading a book, his head shooting up when he heard the door opening. "Neil—"

"I don't wanna fight," Neil sniffled and wiped his nose on the bottom of his tie. He had to stop crying in front of Todd. "I don't even wanna talk. I just—" He wiped his nose again. "I just need to be with you right now, okay?" Neil didn't notice the blush on Todd's face or the

reluctance in the pat on the bed that eventually lured Neil over, and he sure didn't notice the crippling embarrassment and shock that struck Todd's heart when he bypassed a seat next to him and instead curled up into his friend's lap. He shoved his face into the bottom of Todd's sweater and took a deep breath, almost crying harder.

He couldn't smell the rain. He couldn't hear Todd's breathing. He couldn't feel Todd's shaky hand setting itself on his head. He couldn't taste the tears falling into his mouth. He couldn't see Todd's worried expression. His five senses had somehow become useless, and he needed those to take in Todd's presence. He somehow convinced himself that Todd wasn't even there anymore—he couldn't *feel* him for god's sake—and he came to the stupid conclusion that Todd had left him and it had been his fault, so he reached over to roll up his sleeve and scratch his wrist, but something caught his hand.

Todd. He was still there.

Slowly, everything came back to Neil. Todd's Welton sweater soaking up his tears, Todd's hand holding his, Todd's fingers scratching the top of his head. *Todd.* He was still there. He was right there. Neil nuzzled his face into Todd's side, taking in the returned scent of a rainy day. Now being hyper-aware of everything around him, noticing everything except the fact that his best friend was staring at him with all the love in the world in his eyes and that he was crying with the sadness of that worldly love being unrequited. That his friend was mad at him because he'd never be able to love Neil the way he wanted to. Neil didn't notice any of that, which was probably why he made the mistake of whispering *I love you* under his breath right before he fell asleep in his friend's arms.

Chapter End Notes

> this chap might not be good cause i kinda rushed it bc i made my friend watch dps with me today and i came here to cope bc i love neil sm and he needs to be held

Seventh—Even If You Stab Me In The Heart

Chapter Summary

Mira pays a visit to Welton and somehow it inspires Neil and Todd to finally reconcile.

Chapter Notes

i don't think there's any content warnings here for this chapter which is surprising oh my gosh guys its rlly just serotonin in this chapter

also excuse me for all the original character mentions but i feel like extra characters outside of the main story can rlly help develop more backstory for neil and todd which i love doing bc we dont actually know a lot ab them beyond welton like we've only seen a like three month window of their entire lives and that's just wild to me

anyway happy reading!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Go fish."

"Neil, for the last time, we are not playing go fish." His girlfriend laughed at him, shoving him and getting cards thrown in her face in return. His father and Mr. Nolan had approved of a visit from Mira to Welton so long as Neil was on top of his schoolwork, and he was. He always was. It was the one thing he was always on track of, even when he was going through a total psychotic episode like he had been the previous week. Everything was okay again. One night with Todd and he was better than ever, but him and Todd still weren't on talking terms. He had woken up in Todd's bed the next morning with Knox across from him, but Todd wasn't there. He was now avoiding Neil even harder than he had been before, but Neil tried to push it to the back of his mind, knowing that Todd was still there if he needed him. So he focused on his schoolwork, his five million extracurriculars, and his very pretty girlfriend sitting across from him on the Welton lawn.

When she was right there in front of him, it was very hard for Neil to believe he had ever been conflicted about whether or not his feelings for her were real. They were. Charlie was right. Neil did like his girlfriend. He liked her a lot. Anyone who was willing to step foot

onto the ground of Hell-ton just to see him was worth keeping around. He picked up all the cards he had thrown and shuffled them, suggesting that maybe they should just start playing go fish and listening to Mira rave on about the announcement of the play they were doing that year.

"Twelve angry men?" Neil asked. He had never heard of it, but he knew it was a play that the high schooler's at Welton studied for he had seen it in Jeffery Anderson's hands during a debate practice once. "Are the auditions open?"

"Nope," Mira answered with a smile that Neil definitely thought she shouldn't have had.

"But Henley is a girl's school..."

"Call it genderbending," Mira said happily, "I'm going for juror number six."

"Mir, I don't know what that means."

"I know you don't!" Mira replied, still smiling and using a tone that Neil thought was even more inappropriate. She reached into her coat and pulled out a short, thin book and handed it over to Neil. "I stole a script." Neil was too busy staring at the small booklet to grab it, but soon it was being shoved in his face. "Go on! Take it!"

He did just that and flipped through it. He couldn't help but smile at her excitement. Mira was a dedicated actor. That was the only thing about her that he had kept under wraps around his parents. They couldn't know about that. They had to think that Mira was planning on being a lawyer or something when she got out of school. His father would never let him spend his time around someone like Mira, let alone date them. Good thing that everything else about her was absolutely perfect, and she seemed alright with keeping her passions a secret from his family, though she was always encouraging him to try and talk to his dad about it. Neil always tried to change the subject when it came up. He was never going to talk to his father about acting.

"What's Ave going for?" Neil asked, and he smiled at that too. He loved having reconnected with his old babysitter because now she was even cooler. She never particularly treated Neil like a kid in the first place, but now that he was almost a whole teenager, she was acting even more mature with him! They'd gotten into a talk about the current political climate the other month, and it made Neil ecstatic.

Mira pushed the script down from Neil's hands and looked at him. "Guess."

"Uh... juror number one?"

Mira made the obnoxious sound of a buzzer communicating that a contestant had gotten the wrong answer. "She's directing."

"Wait, for real?" Neil asked.

Mira nodded. "She's super hyped about it. Are you gonna come?"

"Come? To the play?" Neil scratched his back nervously. He didn't know if he could manage that. It had taken enough out of him to sneak out last year, and he wasn't sure how many times he could forge signatures until his parents found out about it. "I dunno. I wanna."

"It's her first time directing. She'd love it if you came."

"I—I know," Neil stuttered out, "I told you I wanna, but—"

"I can ask your dad," She offered, "When I go back home. Closer to the show, of course. I'll tell him that I want you to come see me perform."

"But he can't know that—"

"I'll say my mom forced me to do it," Mira interrupted and put a hand on his knee. "I've thought it out, Neil. I'll get you to that play. Girl scout's honor."

Neil snickered at her. "You're in the girl scouts?"

"Shut *up*." She shoved his leg. "I was, but scout's honor is scout's honor, stupid."

Neil froze for a millisecond, uncomfortably shifting on the grass and mumbling, "Don't call me stupid."

"Okay, dumb-dumb," She said and then looked behind her at as the clock tolled four. It was time for her to go. She hopped up and dusted some blades of grass off of her skirt. She reached down and pulled Neil up off the ground and into her arms. She was shorter than him, but only by a little bit. The top of her head nearly reached his, so she didn't fit as perfectly into Neil's hug like... like some other people might have. "Thanks for letting me come."

"Of course," Neil said, "Why would I not?"

"I dunno." Her grip tightened slightly. "I kinda thought maybe you wouldn't want me to see your friends or something."

"My friends?" Neil asked, "... Did you *wanna* see them?"

"Not if you don't want me to." She pulled back and looked at him.

"Why would I not want you to?"

"I mean, Charlie doesn't seem to like me. You said he calls me 'Maya' all the time."

"Well, that's just—Charlie's a jokester. He doesn't mean anything by it."

"And Knox?"

"What about him?"

"You literally told me that he doesn't like it when you talk about me."

"Knoxy doesn't like it when I talk about a lot of things."

"And Todd..."

"... Todd?"

She fidgeted with her fingers and looked at the ground. "I don't know. You're literally in a fight with him cause of me."

"What?" Neil said, "It's not cause of you. Todd's got family troubles and it's making him act all weird. It's got nothing to do with you, I swear."

"Swear all you want," She responded, "But I know what I know."

"And what do you know?"

As if he had been summoned, Todd suddenly appeared in the distance behind Mira's shoulder. He wasn't watching them, or at the very least he was trying to pretend like he wasn't, but he wasn't alone either. Knox, Charlie, Pitts, Meeks, *and* Cameron were hiding behind a pillar next to him, poking their heads out like those scenes in movies where the characters were spying around the corner. It was kind of hysteric, but Neil didn't want to laugh and have Mira turn around and see his friends like that. If he didn't want her to meet them, it was only because they were all freaks, not because of whatever else she was implying. It looked like they had sacrificed Todd out into the open to

make more space behind the pillar, which they definitely did not have still. Neil snapped back into it when Mira started talking.

"I think Todd's jealous of me," Mira said, "Which is—I get it. Last summer my friend got a boyfriend and by the end of June she had forgotten my name, so I do get it. That's probably the type of thing Todd's worried about, you know? That you're gonna leave him behind because I'm so awesome?" She punched Neil's shoulder lightly and he let a smile creep onto his face. He already suspected that what she was saying was what was up with Todd, hence why he had violently reassured him how much he was always going to be Neil's number one, but his reaction and the fact they were *still* fighting about it was starting to make Neil think there was something else Todd wasn't telling him.

"I'm not gonna do that to him," Neil said, "No offense."

"None taken," She said, "Bros before hoes."

Neil gasped, but tried to play it off like he had purposefully been trying to be overly dramatic. "Don't say that about yourself."

"Are you calling me a *bro*?"

"Well, I'm not *not* calling you a bro."

She laughed and hugged Neil one more time. "Bye, Neil. I'll call you next week?"

"Please do," He responded, and then turned and made direct eye contact with his friends as soon as Mira was walking behind him. They all fell over at the sudden revelation that Neil had known they were there the entire time, and he saw Todd once again get sacrificed as the others pushed him forward and ran away, leaving him behind to explain. Neil shook his head slowly and was about to walk over, but then he didn't. If Todd wanted to talk, he'd let Todd walk over to him... because Todd had a bad tendency of just going along with things. He'd make up with Neil even if he didn't want to if Neil was the one initiating the conversation, so Neil wanted it to be completely natural. He wanted Todd to actually *want* to talk. To his surprise, Todd gave him a look. A look that was asking why he wasn't already walking over there, so he started to walk over there. "Where'd they go?"

Todd shrugged. "Wish I knew."

"Do they think that I didn't see them?"

"We can let them believe what they want." Todd kicked at a tuft of grass growing between the cracks of the sidewalk they were standing on. "So that's her?"

Neil looked behind him as if Mira was still going to be standing right there, but she was long gone. "Yeah. That's Mira."

"She's..." Todd trailed off, "She's pretty."

"You're pretty." *Hey, hey, Neil. What the fuck?* Neil had no real idea why that was the first thing to slip out of his mouth, but he coughed really obnoxiously to cover it up as some sort of mistake. "You're *right*. My mouth went too fast for my brain. Too many... words."

"Uh-huh."

"What do you have?" Neil pointed to the book Todd was holding, trying very desperately to change the subject and hope that Todd just went with it and believed his lame excuse, even though it was very clear he didn't, but it also seemed like he didn't want to bring it up either. Todd pulled the book from his side and looked down at it. Unfortunately, Neil then recognized it.

"I dunno. Some weird book that Charlie—"

"Nope!" Neil swiped the book from Todd's hands and shoved it into his abnormally large pant pocket. "Absolutely not. Do not read that."

Todd was beyond confused. "Huh?"

"Bad book. Weird book," Neil rambled, "Charlie gave it to me too and it's—"

"You read a book?" Todd cut him off.

Neil smiled and shoved him. "Shut up."

"Well." Todd crossed his arms. "I don't have any other books."

"Oh yeah sure," Neil rolled his eyes, "I find that extremely hard to believe."

"For real! I don't!" Todd defended, "Why else would I be taking books from *Charlie*?"

"Fair point." Neil pulled *Lolita* back out of his pocket and looked down at the cover. He sighed loudly, remembering how deeply it had traumatized him when he had finally decided to crack it open. "Can I read it with you then, at least?"

Todd pursed his lips. "I'm still not... ready to hang out with you."

"Then can I sit next to you while you read?" Neil tried again, "That's not really hanging out, is it? You can even pretend I'm not there."

Neil didn't like the fact that Todd looked like he was going to burst into tears, and that got even worse when Todd *did* let a tear slip. He extended his sleeve and wiped it off his cheek very quickly and quietly said, "Thank you."

"For what?" Neil asked, "What did I do?"

"Just for trying," Todd sniffled, "Last month I made it seem like that was a bad thing and that I hated it. I don't know why I did that. I'm sorry. I was being annoying. I'm really, *really—"* Neil cut him off by wrapping him in a hug, feeling the top of Todd's head perfectly slot underneath his chin. Even while his face was shoved in Neil's shoulder, Todd continued with his apology. "—sorry."

"I don't care, Todd," Neil said.

"You *gotta* care."

"Well, I don't." Neil hugged him tighter. "I told you... I'll love you no matter what—even if you stab me in the heart."

"I'm starting to think we should test that theory."

Neil laughed and he finally felt better for the first time all month. Sure, he wasn't freaking out and he was passing his classes, but that didn't mean he felt better. He couldn't feel better until this. Until Todd was pressed against him accepting the love and care Neil was putting forth for him. For a moment, nothing really mattered except Todd. Not the (still kind of shady) fact he thought for a while that he didn't like his girlfriend, not the fact that his father was pushing him to his limits, and not even the fact that Charlie knew about... *that*. He forgot about all of it. Because Todd was right there in front of him, and everything felt okay when Todd was in front of him.

He knew that had to be unhealthy. He had to learn to be happy somehow without Todd. But, hey, he was *twelve*. Not like he was full-

grown adult depending on him. Todd was his best friend and they were little boys—it was normal to be unhealthily attached to one another. It's not like they were married or something. They were just best friends, curled up against one another, reading a sexually inappropriate book under a tree.

What could possibly be weird about that?

Chapter End Notes

> COMMENTS THANK YOU I LOVE YOU AS PER USUAL. am rlly self conscious about my writing and have been having writers block with everything except anderperry, so the nice comments are really encouraging and i love you all. and i know yall cant possible be annoyed with me for updates but LMAO i feel like im writing so much
>
> also question... as our boys reach their mature years... how do we feel... about... explicit writing. def not now bc they are twelve but... i dont wanna say *smut* but how do we feel about smut

Seventh—Book Pages And Rain

Chapter Summary

> Neil's first day of being a teenager proves to be as angsty as all the media makes teenage years seem.

Chapter Notes

> cw// mention of injury (i honestly dont know if this needs a content warning but like some people are squeamish. no vivid descriptions bc omfg i would die too), overt homophobia, homophobic slurs, mention of derealization (a little squinty to see that one so i wouldnt worry too much), major daddy issues, minor implications of an abusive household, and minor inappropriate themes

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil spent the latter half of his birthday at soccer practice. He wasn't opposed to soccer—it wasn't the *worst* thing in the world. Most of his friends played it with him too, so it was fun. Playing an actual game with his friends where they couldn't just make up their own rules and there were actual consequences if they decided to start hitting one another was rather refreshing. Charlie couldn't have cared less about soccer, Knox was perfect at it because Knox Overstreet was perfect at everything, Neil wasn't the worst, and Todd was really, really good. Like weirdly good. Neil thought that he ran too fast for someone that was that short.

Todd didn't seem to particularly *enjoy* soccer, but he was still good at it. It was one of the only things Neil ever saw him not focus so hard on, and somehow it was one of the things that he was the best at. He'd tried to tell Todd that this probably meant he didn't have to try so hard all the time on everything he did—which was something he'd tried to tell him before, but it was better once he had an example—but Todd had dismissed him and said that he *did* try really hard at soccer and that Neil just wasn't seeing it. So Neil looked. He looked really hard to see where this "trying hard" was, but Todd did everything with absolute ease, and Neil hated to say it, but he looked like Jeffery when Jeffery... well, when Jeffery did anything, really.

Except Jeffery Anderson sucked at soccer.

Well, he didn't exactly *suck*, but he wasn't the MVP by any means. Neil was surprised that Todd wasn't bragging about his soccer skills every second of every day, but then he figured he knew why. Jeffery was good at everything, and *everyone* knew about it. Todd didn't want to be anything like his brother, so he never shared his talents with anyone and demeaned his own abilities. Neil hated it. He thought Todd should show the world how cool he was, but Todd never wanted the spotlight, even if he was jealous that Jeffery got to bask in it all the time. Todd wasn't a spotlight guy like his brother, but that didn't mean he didn't like any light on him at all.

No one really got that, though, so they were always trying to push Todd into the spotlight when he really didn't want it. Even Neil was guilty of this, but he was just so proud of Todd and everything he did. He could go on and on at dinner about all the goals Todd had scored or the times he had stolen the ball from someone running at light speed, and it made Todd duck into his hands and barely eat his dinner because he hated attention. Neil thought that was confusing, but then he thought, very sadly thought, that Todd just wasn't used to attention, so he didn't know how to deal with it, and even worse, he never thought he deserved it.

But Neil thought Todd Anderson deserved everything and he reminded Todd all the time.

"Did you see Charlie catch that penalty?" Todd asked him while they were taking a break on the sidelines. Usually, Welton wasn't a fan of giving the boys any breaks of sorts, but it was hard to deal with a bunch of sweaty, hormonal boys if they didn't at least get some water down their throats. Charlie made a show of trying to drink his own sweat one time and it had upped their amount of water breaks. Todd popped off the cap of his plastic water bottle and drank slowly. Todd never drank his water fast. Neil thought even if Todd was dying of dehydration he'd still sip his water like he was having tea with the queen. "It was so—surprising? He wasn't even trying and he caught it one-handed."

"No, I was watching you shoot the penalty."

Todd capped his water, trying not to look at Neil. "And what? You just kept staring at me *after* I kicked the ball?"

"I like your reactions when you make a goal," Neil said, drinking his own water as if he had been doing anything that practice except making faces to Charlie from across the field and examining Todd's

movements like he was a referee. "You always seem so surprised even though you shoot penalties and score nine out of ten times."

"Ten percent is a large margin of error," Todd said, "Especially when the goalie is someone as unpredictable as Charlie."

"I think you've weaved your way around his web by now, Toddsie."

"Oh yeah?" Todd asked, "And how's that?"

"I don't know." Neil shrugged and put his water bottle next to Todd's. Neil had a metal water bottle with his name written on the side, so he always used it to separate Todd's water bottles from the many other identical ones near it. Neil thought that Todd oughta have a real water bottle for being such a soccer prodigy, but Neil also doubted his parents knew enough about Todd's skills to actually get him one. "You're just good at soccer, Todd. You gotta tell me."

"You gotta stop saying that," Todd complained, "People think I'm some sort of god."

Neil wanted to object and say that it was because that was *true,* but their water break ended and Todd gave him a stupid little *Happy Birthday* ruffle in his hair and he just decided to drop it and go back on the field. Being a teenager felt no different than being a tween physically, but emotionally, Neil felt a sudden burst of maturity. He felt like he could drive a car to the bank and make a deposit... that's how adult-y he was feeling. He felt adult-enough to march into his room, dig Charlie's PlayBoy magazines out from under the bed, and ask him 'what's this, young man?'

Of course, all that maturity immediately left his body when he was suddenly clutching his ankle in the grass and crying like a baby. He barely even knew how it happened or if *he* had caused it. But *somebody* had slid wrong and his ankle decided that it wanted to go around three-hundred sixty degrees like an owl's head. It hurt more when it had happened than when Neil was sitting down and not moving, but it definitely started hurting again when their supervisor started twisting it about and telling Neil to be quiet and to be a man. Charlie tried his best to fight for him and say that crying over your *ankle breaking* was being a man because, in all honesty, how the fuck was a *man* supposed to react when his bone snapped in two? But Charlie got a demerit and had to sit on the sidelines while Neil's ankle got continually abused.

It could've been recoverable—or at the least not so bad—if it stopped

being spun and spun again, and it took all the convincing in the world to get that old man off of him, but soon the boys were left alone on the field while the supervisor went to call Neil's father. Maybe he would get a medical professional, but since it was a boarding school, Neil's father definitely had to know first. Neil couldn't imagine how his father was going to react to this. Firstly, he didn't know how it happened and therefore had no story to tell, secondly, his already iffy soccer skills were going to get insulted, and thirdly, his father would spin this event into some excuse to make Neil's education more stressful than it already was. Whether that be adding more to his plate to replace soccer or taking something off his plate because obviously Neil was 'taking on too much.'

"We can get you a rainbow cast as a present," Pitts said, "I had one of those when I broke my arm in first grade. It was an eye sore."

"Then why would he want that?" Meeks asked.

"It was just a suggestion."

"Well, keep it to yourself," Knox said, immensely worried. Knox was like a mother. He didn't like it when his friends got injured. Well, from outside entities at least. Knox probably wouldn't care if Charlie beheaded one of them, but he was crying almost as hard as Neil while he cradled his broken ankle. He was knelt next to him with a hand on his shoulder, and Neil felt like he *was* being comforted by his mother. Well, not his mother. His mother probably wouldn't do a damn thing, but by *a* mother in general. By Mommy Overstreet. Oh yeah. He'd tell Charlie that nickname and watch Knox squirm with discomfort later. "It's not helping anyone."

"You know what? I don't like being attacked."

"Pitts, I swear to god."

Meeks and Pitts started bickering and Knox basically dragged them both by their ears to sit in timeout with Charlie on the sidelines, leaving Todd to watch over Neil because everyone trusted Todd with basically anything. Well, basically anything when it came to babysitting or taking care of something. Todd was gentle, delicate, and careful. Pitts had nearly recruited him to hamster-sit during the summer while he was going on a family trip, but Todd had to decline because he was going to Richmond that month. Meeks had offered to do it instead and was met with a very untrusting stare from his roommate.

"Oh geez," Todd muttered, trying not to look down at Neil's ankle. It wasn't like you could see the bone or anything, but that didn't mean it was pretty to look at. Neil even hated touching it, but it felt better when his cold hands were wrapped around it. Better than the itchy soccer field anyway. He would've rather been sitting on a bench or something, but it just so happened he had cracked his means of getting there in half, and he wasn't about to make any of his friends drag him to the nearest bench which was fifty feet away. Todd looked up to Neil's face. "Not the best way to spend a birthday."

"Are you kidding?" Neil winced, "This is my ideal birthday. Wish I had broken my ankle last year."

"D'ya really think it's broken?"

"Well, it's certainly not sprained."

"You can have my desert tonight."

"Oh, Charlie'll steal it," Neil dismissed, pretending like Todd didn't give up his desert every night to one of the ravenous boys. Todd's appetite was small. He barely had room for dinner, but Neil always made sure he got something sweet at the end of it. Even if it required giving up his own desert. He couldn't stand the thought of Todd not eating, and he knew Todd wasn't about to speak up for himself, so instead, he just snuck whatever he had under the table to him until he finally agreed to take and eat it. "And I'm fine. It's no big deal, really."

"It'll take months to heal."

"Okay, do you *want* me to feel bad, then?"

"No," Todd shook his head, "I just want you to stop under-reacting. You're hurt, Neil, and you're treating it like you just have a scratch."

"It's not a a big deal," Neil repeated.

"Yes it is!" Todd insisted, "I—I don't like it when you get hurt!" He shrunk in on himself after that sentiment and twiddled with his fingers, quietly continuing, "Specially' not on your birthday of all days. I mean, this is the worst thing that coulda' happened."

Neil caught sight of his fidgeting and held out his hand. "Here."

Todd looked down at it nervously. "Are your hands clean?"

"Obviously not," Neil answered, but continued shoving his hand in Todd's face. "Just don't swallow and brush your teeth real good later. Five minutes insteada' two."

"Fine." Todd took the offer of Neil's hand and started biting at the edge of his fingertips. Neil could obviously tell that Todd was simultaneously freaking out about Neil being hurt and then freaking out over the fact that he was freaking out, so he figured he'd help his friend. Todd looked like a baby sucking contentedly on a lollipop when he was biting Neil's fingertips, and it was endearing. Everything about Todd was endearing, but especially this. Especially the way chewing on Neil like he was gum calmed him down. Neil wasn't sure how it worked, but he wasn't about to complain. Not when Todd looked as calm as he did when he was asleep. "Sorry. I shouldn't be freaking out so bad."

"You can freak out however much you wanna," Neil said and pointed at Todd with his other hand, "Just don't be telling me how much I should be freaking out, alright? I'm fine."

"I just worry about you, Neil," Todd said, "And I *really* don't like it when you get hurt."

"You hurt me all the time!"

Todd shoved his shoulder. "Shut up. I mean seriously hurt."

"This is hardly serious."

"*Neil*," Todd warned, and Neil backed off. He could not freak out when he oughta be, but Todd was going to throat punch him if he continued acting like this was no big deal. "I'm about to break your other ankle and see how seriously you take it then."

"You don't have the nerve."

Todd wanted to say something snarky in response, but he really couldn't while he was biting on Neil's fingertips to calm down about an injury that wasn't even his. "I guess you can't do anything for your birthday tonight."

"Hmm?" Neil responded, "Did you have something planned?"

Todd flushed the tiniest bit. "No!—No, I didn't. I figured Charlie might... he treats your birthday like the fourth of July."

"I spend every night with Charlie," Neil waved his free hand, "His birthday present to me could be *leaving me alone*."

Todd laughed and looked over his shoulder to gaze upon his friends, seeing that their supervisor had returned and was having a talk with them. Neil had to wonder why he, the cripple, was still laying in the middle of the field, but he didn't mind too much. He pulled Todd down to lay next to him. If he was going to continue being a prisoner to the grass, he waned to at least have a cellmate.

"What did you want to do for your birthday then?"

"Break my bones," Neil joked, "So I'm doing pretty good."

Todd bumped into him with his shoulder. "I'm serious, Neil."

"I didn't wanna do anythin' cept' hang out with you," Neil answered honestly.

"You hang out with me everyday."

"Pfft," Neil made a dismissive sound. "So what? Plus, you're nicer to me on my birthday."

"Don't take that too personally," Todd said, "It's a worldwide courtesy."

"Well, I like your courtesies," Neil said pointedly, "And I like it when you read to me. You'd be too nice to tell me no on my *birthday*."

Todd looked over at him suddenly, "I read to you *all the time*."

"Uh-uh," Neil denied, and he swore he was right. Todd hadn't truly read anything to him since the time he was sitting on top of him reading Dracula, and Neil loved when Todd read to him because Todd's voice was just like him: gentle and delicate. It was soothing to listen to. Todd could be saying the meanest things in the world and it would still calm Neil down if it was in his regular talking voice. And when Todd read to him before bed, Neil had the best dreams. He could never remember them, but he always woke up with a warm fuzzy feeling. The first coupla' times he'd worried it was like fifth grade with the—with the nocturnal emissions, but since the... *Charlie incident*... Neil had been able to tell the difference between a good warm fuzzy feeling and *that* warm fuzzy feeling. The one Todd gave to him when he read was most decidedly the former and *not* the latter. Todd never, would never, will never give Neil that feeling.

"You're such a child," Todd crossed his arms, "What do you want me to read to you? Dr. Seuss?"

"I don't care *what* you read," Neil responded, "Even if it's the obituaries in the local newspaper. I just want you to read to me."

"You're so weird..." Todd turned away from Neil and Neil could see him curling into a little ball, Todd's defense mechanism when he was uncomfortable, but Neil couldn't imagine why he would be uncomfortable right then. They had *just* made up. They kissed in sixth grade. There was virtually no more lines that they could cross, so Neil couldn't conceive of any reason *reading to him* would make Todd uncomfortable, but it did, so he let it go.

"You too," Neil said, "You chose to be friends with me, Toddsie. I don't know what to tell you."

Soon enough they were called away from the field and Neil was brought crutches so he could drag himself to the infirmary. His father was already there and none of his friends were allowed in, so Neil was in for a rough time. He slid into a bed while a random doctor got to work on starting the healing process on his ankle. He didn't want to look at his father. He *never* wanted to know what his reaction was to this event. If he could've hidden it forever, he would've, and everything only got worse when the doctor pulled out the x-ray to show the Perry's exactly what kind of fracture Neil was dealing with.

On top of the fact his ankle had catapulted itself in a separate direction, apparently it was even worse because Neil was *stressed*. Neil wasn't aware stress could actually have any effect on your bones, let alone assisting in shattering them. That was the fact that made the situation go from bad to worse. His father assumed his regular disciplining position and Neil knew he was in for it once they were alone. Plenty of things were on his mind while the doctor droned on about how long it would take his ankle to heal. Stuff like: shouldn't his dad just be worried about him? Why was it his fault that his ankle was broken? Who gets mad at their kid for breaking a bone? And definitely stuff like: There is no possible way that he was about to get yelled at because of the stress his father had put on him. Neil didn't *want* to be in soccer, chess, science, math, and whatever other activities he had gotten thrown into. He didn't want to be in Algebra One as a seventh grader—in fact, that barely seemed possible! It seemed like he was going to run out of math by the time Freshman year even came around, but nonetheless, once the doctor closed the curtain and gave them their privacy, Neil was done for.

"How do you suppose this happened, Neil?" His father asked.

"I slipped."

"If this is some attempt to get sympathy..." His father started, "Or some sort of ploy to get out of soccer..."

"No, father," Neil said, but he immediately regretted interrupting. "Sorry, sir. It's not. I enjoy soccer."

"Good, because you're not getting out of it." Mr. Perry leaned back in his chair and thought carefully. "I will speak with Mr. Nolan about getting you on the sidelines to observe and strategize. As for your classes, I hope you don't think this will be an excuse to fall behind?"

"No, sir," Neil said like a robot. He swore he never heard himself as automated except when he was speaking with his own family. "It'll give me extra time for school work. I'll work on getting ahead."

"Alright," His father said, "But I do suppose I should take the doctor's recommendations about your level of responsibility. Perhaps I shouldn't have been letting you do the things you have been."

Neil saw light at the end of the tunnel. His father admitting that he had put his thirteen-year-old son under too much stress? It nearly seemed impossible. And that's because it was. His father went in a completely different direction.

"I knew you were too young for a relationship," He said, "But your mother thought it might be good for you. Clearly not."

Neil shot up in his bed and looked at his father, hoping he could find a joke in those humorless eyes, but no. His father was serious. Out of all things to blame a broken bone on, a girlfriend didn't seem the most logical option. He'd never seen a show where the husband had divorced his wife and left their family because of a broken pinky or something. Neil wanted to be furious—he wanted to throw something. He *couldn't* break up with Mira. He liked Mira. They'd been dating for four months! It was the happiest Neil had ever been, and now his father was about to rip the rug from right under his feet. "Father, that's unfair to Mira."

His father whipped around, giving him a glare before checking outside the curtain subtly. "Neil, do not tell me what is and is not fair. You will *not* try to correct me in public. Understood?"

Neil was silent for a moment, but ultimately fell back. "Yes, sir."

"Mira is a fine girl. She will be able to handle it," His father said, "After all, it's not like this was going to go anywhere. She is not the type I'd want you marrying."

"...What?" Neil was under the impression that his father thought Mira was as perfect as he did.

"She came to me the other week telling me about some play she wanted you to go see," His father said, "I politely told her no, but it made me start thinking that she might be trying to get you into the wrong things. I'm sure she'll figure herself out, but like that damn babysitter, she's not taking you down with her."

"Don't..." Neil's word died on his tongue, but he couldn't find the courage to revive them. All he wanted was to defend his girlfriend against his father. She was no type of girl. She was just a girl. A girl that Neil really liked. The *first* girl that Neil had ever really liked. He didn't want to just let that go because his father thought she was somehow a cause of his broken ankle.

"Don't what?" His father asked, "Well, Neil, if you have something to say then say it."

"Don't you think that'll make her upset?"

"I told you she will be able to handle it," His father said, "You can spend the time you would usually be on the phone with her studying and healing up that ankle. I suppose you're out of playing for the rest of this year, but no matter, you can get some extra practice in during the summer. Maybe Charlie can come over."

While Neil was excited at the aspect of Charlie coming over during the summer, he didn't let it peak through everything else that he was upset about. It was his *birthday*. He wasn't supposed to feel like this. Especially not from a person who took part in contributing to his birth. "Charlie's family goes traveling during the summer, sir."

"All summer?" Mr. Perry asked, and Neil nodded. Charlie wasn't quite Knox-level rich, but he was somewhere up there. You definitely weren't poor if you've been to Europe three times by age ten. "And Knox? I suppose he travels a lot too."

"Yes, sir," Neil answered, "You know those rich family types."

"I do know, which is why you need to not pull stunts like this, Neil. We can't afford this. Money-wise and otherwise," His father said, "We can find a trainer, maybe. But you're going to be the same level of skill as the other boys come next year."

Neil was scared to suggest it, but somehow his heart was a lot less scared than his brain, so the next words slipped out of his mouth laced in an embarrassing wreath of emotion. "Todd Anderson is good at soccer, sir. He usually goes down to Richmond during the summers, but I'm sure his family wouldn't mind if he stayed with us."

His father paused, obviously having mixed emotions. He wanted his son to be like *Jeffery* Anderson, but it also seemed like he wanted his son to stay away from *Todd* Anderson. "We can find another option."

"No, sir, I think Todd would be best," Neil kept going, "He's on top of his school work, and you can ask anybody around about his soccer skills. He's great."

"Neil," His father warned, "I do not need someone like him near my son or in my house."

That struck a chord with Neil, and he started speaking without thinking—a dangerous thing to do with his father. "Todd is in the top percentile of our class. He's *just* as good if not *better* than his brother. And he's—"

"That will be enough, Neil!" His father yelled in interruption. Then he cleared his throat and lowered his voice. "Enough. I make the decisions. We can figure it out over the break. Get some rest and heal up that ankle."

Neil's confidence was long gone. He curled back up into his pillow and held his hands within one another. "Yes, sir."

"That's my boy." Mr. Perry threw on his coat and then opened back up the curtains, exposing his son to the rest of the empty infirmary. "Enjoy the rest of your birthday. I'll call later this week to check back in."

Charlie popped up from behind the other side of the curtain once Mr. Perry was gone and Neil nearly had a heart attack. At least he would've been in an empty infirmary already. "You shouldn't let him talk to you like that."

"Uh-huh," Neil said, dripping with sarcasm. "Your parents don't talk to

you like that?"

"They do."

"And you argue with them?"

"I don't."

"Then shut it, Charlie. I don't wanna hear it."

"Geez." Charlie exhaled and sat at the head of Neil's bed. "What's his problem with Todd, anyway? Seems like he murdered the family dog or something."

"My father is convinced that Todd is a..." Neil trailed off. He never liked using that word and Todd's name in the same sentence.

"Oh," Charlie said plainly, "Your dad thinks Todd's a fag?" Neil shamefully nodded. "Well, wouldn't he burst a blood vessel if he found out it were actually *me*? Maybe I should just kiss you right now."

"Please do not do that, Charlie."

"Fine, fine," Charlie said, "I suppose you don't care, then?"

"About *what*?"

"You know, what your dad cares about," Charlie said, "If Todd likes a little out of his circle. Swings the other way."

"He doesn't," Neil said, "But I don't care, no. Do you see me trying to get *you* burnt at the stake?"

"We haven't kissed," Charlie responded, "We could, but we haven't."

"And what's that matter?"

"Well, you've kissed Todd."

"How do *you* know about that?"

"Uh, Todd told me?" Charlie said like it was obvious, "It's not like our little game was a secret. If he had kept it, then it would mean you guys were having an affair. Wouldn't want it to seem like that."

"You're kind of making it seem like that, anyway."

"Well, I'm just saying," Charlie pushed, "That if Todd *was*—well, you've kissed him. So you gotta not care, right?"

"I don't," Neil said, "I said that already, Charlie. What are you trying to do here?"

"Trick you into kissing me mostly." Charlie saw the serious look on Neil's face and rolled his eyes. "Oh, take a joke. *Nothing*, Neil. I'm just stating facts. You've kissed Todd."

"And what about it?" Neil snapped, "I've kissed Knox too." Neil didn't know where in his mind he thought that would've been a helpful response, but his brain was going back to not thinking before speaking now that his father was gone because it definitely *wasn't* a thing he usually did.

"So have I," Charlie smirked, "I've kissed em' both."

Neil clutched at the blankets. "Huh?"

"Nothin'," Charlie said and stood up, smoothing down the blankets were he had been sitting. Neil didn't take his eyes off of him for one moment, and he must've been glaring because Charlie looked too entertained. "You keep your secrets. I keep mine."

"I'm not keeping any secrets!" Neil shouted, "You've... You've kissed Todd?"

"You care?" Charlie fixed his bangs in a nearby mirror, and it was irritating Neil how much he refused to look at him. Charlie glanced toward him momentarily. "Jealous?"

"You're *insane*," Neil said, "I don't even know what you're talking about anymore."

"Okay," Charlie said and walked toward the curtain, pulling it shut and leaving Neil back in the darkness. "See you later, Perry."

Neil listened to Charlie's footsteps completely leave the room and then he allowed himself to whip the blankets off of him and sweat out all his worries. He didn't even know what he was worried about. *Charlie kissing Todd*. No. No, no, no. He was worried about having to break up with Mira. He was sure she would understand, but he still didn't want to do it. He liked Mira. He smiled for a moment, thinking about how he could brag to Charlie if he were still there. He'd *kissed* Mira. Plenty of times. *He* was the one in a relationship. Not Charlie. *But Charlie had*

kissed Todd. It didn't matter. He couldn't pull that card anyway because soon enough he wasn't going to be in a relationship anymore. He could secretly date Mira, he supposed, but he knew Mira would never go for it. She was too responsible for secrets. *Not Todd, though, he kissed Charlie.*

Neil put his head in his hands, reminding himself that he did not care where Charlie Dalton decided to lay his lips. Even if it was on Todd Anderson. He pushed the thought away once more and thought about Avery. She would be devastated Neil couldn't come see the play she had directed, and Neil surely supposed it would be even harder that summer to sneak out and hang out with her, Josh, and Harley. Everything was going wrong for him right then. *Including the fact that Charlie had kissed Todd*. No. Including the fact that Neil couldn't see Todd over the summer again, and he knew he wouldn't forget about it this time around. Without Todd, who knew what was going to happen to him. He'd be anxious all around, hiding from his father in his room, not even daring to sneak a play from library, and *definitely thinking about how Charlie had kissed Todd.*

Okay, maybe he did care, just a little bit, but only because he knew Charlie, and Charlie was a weirdo. Charlie could put his weirdo mouth anywhere but on Todd Anderson. Charlie could go kiss Mr. Nolan for all Neil cared, but *not* Todd. Charlie wasn't allowed to kiss Todd. The only person allowed to kiss Todd was... well, not Neil... but also *maybe* Neil? He didn't know. Just definitely not Charlie Dalton. Why would Todd wanna kiss *him* anyway? Was it because kissing Neil hadn't been good enough? Neil could be self-conscious about that. He already was. He'd ruined Todd's first kiss. Had he ruined it so bad that Todd had to go kiss *Charlie* to make up for it? Surely not. What kind of situation was that anyway? Charlie was probably making it up to get underneath Neil's skin, which was a bad strategy because this *barely* got under Neil's skin. Barely. It was the least of his problems and he did not *care* that Todd had kissed Charlie. He was just simply a concerned, jealous party.

Jealous about some other aspect of the situation, of course, because it wasn't like *he* wanted to kiss Todd. Hell, he hadn't even wanted to kiss Todd the time they'd done it. It was simply for Todd's benefit. That's all it was. Maybe Charlie kissing him had been too, though Neil couldn't imagine how kissing Charlie could be a benefit for anything unless your goal was to throw up in your mouth. But it didn't matter. He didn't care. Not beyond the fact that Todd should get better at judging who he should be kissing. Charlie and Neil was not a good roster. Especially not Charlie. Or anyone else. You know what, Todd

shouldn't kiss anyone. No one was good enough to be kissing Todd. Todd should've known that. Neil had probably told him that at some point.

But then why had he kissed Charlie? And why hadn't he told Neil about it?

Not that Neil cared. Neil did not care. So much he didn't care that he said it out loud just to confirm. "I don't care."

"About what?" Neil's head shot up and he noticed that Todd Anderson himself was sitting in the chair across from his bed. Neil would've liked to think that Todd had just appeared at that coincidental time, but he knew that he had probably been there a while. Todd laughed at his shocked face and kicked his legs up on the edge of Neil's bed, dutifully avoiding his injured ankle. "Sorry, you were just zoning for a lil' bit. Figured I shouldn't interrupt."

Neil got straight to the point. "Did you kiss Charlie?"

"No," Todd said, and Neil felt a weight he didn't even know was there leave his chest, but it returned bit by bit as he saw Todd's blush. He knew that blush. He'd seen it before plenty of times. "Charlie kissed me."

"*What*?"

"He was all upset, ranting about something..." Todd tried to say like it meant nothing. It did not mean nothing. Well, it meant nothing to Neil. But it shouldn't have meant nothing to Todd. "It was to help him, really. I didn't enjoy it. He smells."

"What was he upset about?" Neil pressed.

Todd scratched his cheek. "I don't know if I should tell you. Why do you care anyway? Did he tell you about it?"

"Not entirely," Neil answered, "And I don't. Care, I mean. I don't care. Just figured I'd ask."

Todd shifted in his seat. "Okay."

"Okay," Neil said back, pursing his lips, trying to hold back every thought in his brain. Some slipped through. "It wasn't better than me, though, right?"

Todd's face was entirely red, and Neil felt horrible for causing it, but he needed to know. He needed to know that Charlie Dalton hadn't upstaged him on Todd's very short list of people he had kissed. He just liked being number one, especially when it came to Todd, that was all. Todd sat on his hands and rocked back and forth. "I dunno. I don't really remember."

"Mine or his?"

Todd took a second. "Both, kind of."

Neil's heart hurt just a little bit. Todd didn't remember when they had kissed? Well, whatever. Neil didn't remember it either. He leaned back onto his pillows and stared straight past Todd's ear. "Alright."

"Alright," Todd repeated, clearly desperate to change the subject. "How's the ankle?"

"I have to break up with Mira," Neil said quickly.

Todd seemed shocked at the sudden reveal of information. "Okay. I'm sorry. I know you like her."

"Uh-huh. I like girls." Neil had to stop this tendency of saying things in the stupidest way possible while he was in one of these freakout moods.

"I know," Todd said, and it nearly sounded sad. He tilted his head forward. "Are you okay, Neil?"

"No." Suddenly Neil was crying, and he really, *really* wanted this to stop happening in front of Todd. He tried to wrap his arms around himself and curl into his own little world, but his arms had a mind of their own, reaching out to Todd and making grabby-hands like he was a toddler begging for a toy. It took Todd a second, but once Neil's broken voice said "come here, please" there was really no denying him.

"I presume you're not gonna tell me what's wrong?" Todd asked, climbing into the bed next to Neil, shoving the blankets even further from his sweating form and letting him bury his face in Todd's shoulder. Neil shook his head and Todd felt it. "Okay."

"I would if I knew what was wrong," Neil assured, "But I don't. Not anymore."

"Thas' alright," Todd said, "Just stop crying. It's your birthday. You're not supposed to cry on your birthday."

Neil let out a stupid laugh and wiped his cheek on Todd's sleeve. He looked up to Todd. "I love you."

"I think you should take a nap, Neil," Todd responded, "It'll still be your birthday when you wake up."

Neil thought that sounded like a great idea, but before his eyes closed, his hand clutched on the front of Todd's sweater and he asked, "Will you stay? Here?"

Todd sunk deeper into the infirmary bed. "Sure I will."

"You don't have to," Neil quickly followed up with.

"No, I will," Todd said, and Neil noticed that he was refusing to look down at him and that his arms were stiff against his sides, not relaxing into Neil's touch even if they wanted to. "Least I can do."

"Least you can do for *what*?" Neil asked.

"*I* freaked out earlier," Todd said, "Is' your turn." Neil took that simple answer and closed his eyes, nuzzling his face into Todd's shoulder, taking in a deep breath of the scent he knew would make him feel better, only temporarily worrying about not being able to smell it. But he did smell it and he sighed in relief. Todd let out a nervous laugh at Neil's deep breath and asked, "Smell something you find interesting?"

Neil nodded and took another breath.

"Book pages and rain."

Chapter End Notes

okay live reaction to checking how many words this is

okay so 6000 thats uh fine uh... merry pride month i suppose. 6000 words of the gays winning. as usual: comments i love you dearly and i hope you all enjoy this chapter. im trying to make these longer because these years are only 8 chapters a piece (highschool years are gonna be at least 10 each) so we all get as much anderperry content as we deserve

also once again promise im not a weirdo (i might be) but when i was little and litearlly on the verge of crying and having a break

down (always) my sister would let me like bite on her finger tips and it was actually very calming and i think its just a cute love-thing to do. (obviously my sister and i have a different love than this im literally making myself seem weirder) but family love, platonic love, romantic love. having a comfort is really, are you ready for my favorite word, endearing

Seventh—The Line Between Platonic and Romantic

Chapter Summary

Neil finishes off the first semester of seventh grade in the best and worst place he's ever been in.

Chapter Notes

alright im not gonna lie this one is mean
CW// internalized homophobia, inappropriate themes, self-hating language, descriptions of blood, mentions of injuries that require band-aids (just in case ur super super squeamish), possible implications of self-isolation, heavy denial

TW!!!!// explicit mentions of self-harm used as 'punishment', explicit descriptions of self-harm in general, continued mentions of conversion therapy

i was about to say 'i believe thats it' as if i wrote like three things up there i am so sorry.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mira broke up with him.

Neil took the phone off the hook, spun in the number, put it up to his ear with a shaky breath, and then promptly got broken up with.

He was astonishingly relieved.

He didn't say anything else to her and just hung the phone back up, silently thanking her in his head for the experience, but ending it as if he didn't care for it at all. Afterward, he leaned against the wall and sighed deeply, feeling not at all the way he had expected to feel. Hours before he had been practicing script after script of what to say to his poor girlfriend, but now he hadn't said a thing to her, and he couldn't have been happier about it. Maybe it was because he never wanted to break up with her, so the fact that she had done it instead, said that she wanted to date someone who didn't have a father like his, took away the stress he'd been dealing with and left him only with content. Maybe it was because it truly *was* one less responsibility on his plate, and in a weird way, his father had prepared him for this

heartbreak. She couldn't have known he was prepared to come out of that phone call single, but he was. There was no shock in his system, though perhaps there should've been. He was strangely, weirdly, unbelievably happy.

Neil didn't know what it was, but right after he had hung up the phone, he barely remembered what it felt like to date Mira in the first place. He'd heard about summer flings. Perhaps she was just a summer fling that lasted a bit too long. Mira Lancaster was an amazing girl, but she wasn't the girl for Neil. He'd forever be thankful for the few months they had together, but he was thirteen not thirty, this meant nearly nothing in the grand scheme of his life. He appreciated her and he would always care about her, but it wasn't like the soul had been sucked out of his body and he'd been left behind with nothing. His father, finally, completely on accident, had actually helped Neil for once. He was still mad that he had tried to force Neil into breaking a girl's heart, for *he* couldn't have known what Mira was planning to do, but he found the silver lining within the many situations he found himself in on his crappy birthday.

And on top of it all, he realized how disconnected he'd become from *all* of his friends during his relationship. He thought it was just Todd, but it wasn't. It was Charlie, Knox, Meeks, Pitts... he'd even been pulling away from Cameron, and he was upset about it. For a while he prided himself in his amazing ability to even out his attention between his friends and girlfriend, but turned out he wasn't doing that at all. There were plenty of inside jokes he wasn't a part of and hangouts he'd missed while on the phone with Mira. The first night he wasn't occupied with Mira, he found Charlie sneaking out to Meeks and Pitts' room, and when Neil asked him what he was doing, it shocked the *both* of them that Neil had no idea what the rest of the boys had been planning for the past few months.

And that's why Neil wasn't as upset as he maybe probably should've been... because it wasn't on purpose. Nobody was trying to leave him out or saying that he wasn't allowed to know anything. It was just how the cookie crumbled, but Neil was done with cookies crumbling. He was prepared to eat the *hell* out of those cookies, and he became the mastermind of their little spy operation since he was completely immobile. Their 'spy operation' was melodramatic, but it was hard *not* to feel like the epic brains of a mission when you were left behind with maps and papers while your friends dressed completely in all black snuck out into the halls.

In short, they'd found a way to indefinitely postpone the Christmas

concert.

In long, they had slowly, meticulously incapacitated several old men, sabotaged many sheets of music, and subtly destroyed instruments. All the while making everyone think it was just the superstitious bad luck from Knox breaking one of the bathroom mirrors (also planned) accumulating to destroy one event. Neil didn't know why it was *this* year his friends had decide to pull this stunt. Perhaps because it was the second to last year they'd be required to do this bullshit. Still, they would all, except Charlie, still be doing it come high school, but it would more than not be because of their own choice, so this was a rebellion in favor of free will. A rebellion in favor of free will that would be followed up with all of the boys giving the freewill up to their parents who would still make them sing about Jesus' birthday, but it was the *energy* and *spirit* of the fiasco to revel in and focus on, Charlie said.

Of course Charlie was still Jewish, so he really didn't have much say in all of this, but he was good at rallying the troops and raising spirits.

Neil's main job was memorizing the schedules of all of their teachers and finding good times within the day to start unscrewing valves from clarinets and taking one single sheet of music out of a whole pile. He didn't want to write it down in fear of leaving evidence, but he also didn't want to commit the daily movements of the school staff to his memory, so first he created a different language to use as code, then he taught it to the other boys, and *then* he got to work on tracking his teachers. And it all worked out for him because most of the time he was actually doing nothing except his homework and hanging out with Todd.

Todd's main job of the operation was to be the alibi, being one of the three people who had been left out of the main shabang of things. All of the group agreed that there were certain people who needed to be left out for the safety and security of both the plot and them.

Firstly, Gerard Pitts: falling behind on schoolwork and needed the time to catch up, too tall to do anything in a secretive-type manner, and too innocently pure to get caught in something like this that the rest of the boys would feel a lifetime of guilt if he did.

Secondly, Richard Cameron: way too into Jesus and would probably only pretend to be an ally so he could document every single step of their dirty little scheme.

And thirdly, Todd Anderson: couldn't make up a lie to save his life if he were caught and it was collectively decided that none of the friends would do anything that could possibly defile that poor boy's image. Also, his memory was so good that if he remembered enough details about hanging out with Neil and just *happened* to mention that the other boys were also there, it would be hard to call him a liar because of the excruciating amount of context.

So when Neil wasn't spying on Dr. Hager, he was in his room doing math homework while Todd twirled a pencil in his hands and read Lord of the Flies—a book Neil had gotten for him from an older boy in exchange for hiding a pack of cigs. Todd usually read one chapter a day and come December 6th—the day their plan paid off and Nolan had called off the concert—he had one chapter left, and Neil had rushed his homework while still in class just to get Todd to read it to him. He didn't want to lie but he was *invested* in this book and the small excerpts Todd had read out loud while pointing out how disturbing it was.

And it helped his realize that there were things that Todd had stopped doing that Neil hadn't even realized. After making up and getting past their main fight, Neil assumed things were back to normal, but Todd was different after the whole Mira-breaking-up-with-Neil thing. He just seemed... happier, and Neil couldn't put his finger on what could've caused it. But soon he noticed that Todd had started playing with Neil's hair again—something, like mentioned, that Neil hadn't even noticed that he'd stopped doing. Their legs sloppily intertwined while they sat next to one another doing different tasks on Neil's bed, and Neil couldn't believe he hadn't noticed that Todd curling up in on himself while they sat beside each other wasn't the way things had always been.

This was the way things had always been.

Todd holding a book with one hand and twirling the edge of Neil's hair in the other. Neil's left leg strewn across Todd's lap. Todd's right leg wrapped around it. Neil turning the pages when Todd was done reading. It was unbelievable to him that this was something he forgot naturally happened, but he guessed he was just too happy that Todd had started talking to him again to really notice that things were different. He swore he would never do that again because this was how he liked things. This was what felt normal between him and Todd.

"Wait—they're trying to kill him?" Neil paused Todd's reading and

asked. They were nearly at the very end, and Neil wasn't successfully comprehending what was going on.

"Yeah," Todd said.

"*Why*?"

Todd shrugged. "Why do they do anything?"

"Wish I knew," Neil said, "Do you think we'd be like that if we all got trapped on an island together?"

"For one, I hope you all wouldn't stab me to death on the beach with spears," Todd said, "And for two, no. Welton is much worse than a deserted island and we all seem to be doing fine enough here."

"I would *not* stab you to death on the beach with a spear."

"Thanks, Neil. I'm really flattered," Todd said deadpanned, "Not like that's the bare minimum for a friendship or anything."

"*That's* your bare minimum?" Neil asked and looked over at him. "Not getting murdered?"

"I have spectacularly low standards."

"I've realized."

"Shut up." Todd shoved him. "You do too."

"So you *don't* think that having Charlie Dalton as a roommate is the height of luxury?"

Todd rolled his eyes at him. "You're so stupid."

"Mm. I've heard," Neil said, "But you're just jealous that Knox doesn't snore like a banshee in the middle of the night because lemme tell you *that* is the height of luxury." Todd laughed, so Neil kept going. "And seriously? Waking up because Charlie doesn't know how to keep it down vocally *and* pants-wise? God, I couldn't have asked for a better roommate."

"Pants-wise?" Todd scrunched his eyebrows, but they quickly flew up when he realized what Neil met. "Oh. *Ew.* Ew, ew, ew. I'm never sleeping in Charlie's bed again. Oh my god."

"Oh whatever," Neil said, "You'd have to avoid every bed *ever* if that's

what you're trying to do."

"Shut up," Todd said, "I try not to think about it."

"Maybe we should make it a fun little game," Neil smiled, enjoying the torment he was inflicting just a little too much. "Take a black light over all our friend's bed's and see who's the cleanest."

"Oh my god, Neil, gross," Todd complained and closed the book, probably not being able to shift back to reading about child murder after this conversation. He put it to the side and retracted his hand from Neil's head, using it to shield his forehead like he was trying to prevent Neil's words from going into his brain. "There are some things we can keep to ourselves."

"You know what, I have to deal with Charlie every night," Neil started, "I think it's time you all suffered too."

Todd appeared horrified. "*Every night*?"

Neil looked him in the eyes and confirmed, "Every night."

"God, Neil, are you *listening* to it?"

"Don't make it sound weird!" Neil yelled, and he felt a blush everywhere on his body because it *was* weird. It had been weird that one time. The time that Charlie knew about. "It's not like that. I'm a light sleeper. Charlie is *gross*." That's definitely not was he was thinking the last night of sixth grade, but he was *tired,* okay? It had nothing to do with how attractive he thought Charlie was... because he didn't think Charlie was attractive. Charlie Dalton was gross, disgusting, and any other negative word under the sun.

"Sureee," Todd teased, "Sounds like an excuse to me."

"You know what? Do *you* wanna share a room with him for a night?" Neil asked like it was a threat, like he was close to tying Todd to his bed and leaving him there to deal with the nightmares.

"Are you coming on to me?"

"Oh my god. I literally hate you," Neil said, "Get out of my room you perv."

"Oh so you wanna be *alone* in here with Charlie's bedsheets?"

"Oh my *god*," Neil repeated, "You're the worst."

Todd was smiling so wide at his own taunting, and Neil thought it was adorable. Todd was always so proud of himself during times like this. Times where he could verbally assault his friends in such an effective manner. Neil shoved him, hoping to wipe that smile off of his face, but the more he objected the more Todd got entertained. The more he laughed and the more Neil realized that maybe his whole *needing to be happy without Todd* thing was going to be more impossible than he thought. How could he be happy without seeing Todd's stupid smile and hearing his stupid laugh while he was being just so... stupid?

"Hey, Todd?" Neil asked, "Can I tell you something?"

"You know," Todd started, "I've really started to *not* like when you ask me that."

"Hey!" Neil shouted, "Last time I told you that I loved you."

"You mean you harassed me in the hallway?"

"Oh, stuff it," Neil rolled his eyes, "Can I tell you something or not?"

"Wait, wait, can I guess?" Todd asked excitedly, and Neil knew it was not gonna be good. Todd turned slightly and put his hands out like he was pitching a lucrative business idea. "You're in love with Charlie?"

Neil shook his head as Todd burst out into laughter. He hadn't seen Todd in this good a mood since... well, his birthday last year he supposed. He pushed Todd to get him to stop laughing and then once it was quiet again, he started, "No, that's not it. I'm just—I'm glad Mira broke up with me."

Todd lost all the humor in his face in less than a split second. "...Really?"

"Yeah," Neil affirmed, "I don't know what it is. Obviously I liked her, but this is much better."

Todd's hair fell in front of his eyes, hiding the hopeful look that Neil had been failing to see since his unfortunate phone call with his ex-girlfriend. "What is?"

Neil shrugged. "Plotting to ruin Christmas concerts, and *definitely* getting bullied by you and your low standards."

"Hey! My low standards were not the one's bullying you." Todd yelled, "And what? You're saying you like *Welton* more than a pretty girl?"

"No, I'm saying that I like you more than a pretty girl." Neil barely realized what he said until he noticed that both Todd and him were sitting in complete silence. "You *guys,* I mean. Bros before... I really need to stop saying that. Friends before girl...friends."

"Creative," Todd noted.

"Well, I don't know!" Neil defended, "Buds before d—no."

"I think you're making it worse."

"Charlie's before Harley's."

"Okay *no.* Calling a girl a harley is definitely not any better than where you started," Todd said, "And what did Harley Richardson do to you that you'd pick Charlie over him?"

"Okay, fine! Uh—" Neil thought, "Pitts before gits."

"Regressing."

"Meeks before beaks?"

"What even is that?" Todd asked, "I'm sure you know comparing girls to *birds* isn't any better?"

"Knox's before foxes," Neil said, "What about that?"

"Are you objectifying?"

"I might be."

"Then no."

"Okay Todd's before... bods."

"Ex*cuse* me?"

"It sort of makes sense," Neil said, "I just don't think it applies to relationships as much as it applies to... something else."

"What? Having sex?"

"Todd!"

"Oh shut *up*," Todd said, "I'm thirteen, not seven. I know what the birds and the bees are. And, once again, *not* flattered you'd choose me

over sex. You *should* be doing that. You're a child."

"You're a child," Neil shot back.

"Well do you see *me* having sex?" Todd asked, "Obviously I know that."

"You're stupid."

"No, you."

Neil put an end to this disturbing conversation and reached across Todd to grab Lord of the Flies and shove it back into Todd's hands so they could finish it. He had just wanted to be real for a second about Mira because all his friends had assumed he was devastated at the aspect of being dumped, but he just wasn't, and he wanted to see if any of his friends could tell him why. Todd hadn't helped. Todd had made it seem like he should prioritize girls over friends while also making it seem like he should prioritize his friends over girls. He had almost made it worse, but Neil forgot all about it when Todd's fingers were twirling his baby hairs again, and he committed that feeling to memory. He would never again *not* notice if Todd stopped doing that to him.

And he was right, he noticed.

Right before Christmas break, all of it had just stopped. Even things that hadn't stopped before. Todd was no longer tapping his fingers on Neil's knee, clutching the back of his shirt, playing with his hair, tangling their legs together, chewing on Neil's finger tips... none of it. Neil was upset at the lack of affection from his friend. He was more upset about the loss of that than the loss of Mira, but he didn't bring it up. A few years ago *he'd* stopped doing things he'd always done with Todd. Stopped leaning his head on his shoulder or grabbing his hand and playing with his fingers. He'd stopped because he wanted to reserve all of the touchy stuff he did for when he actually got in a relationship. So he'd pulled it from his regular habits and instead rested his forehead on Mira's shoulder during the summer, and it didn't really bother him that he wasn't doing his things with Todd anymore because Todd was still doing *his* things with Neil.

Now he wasn't, but, again, Neil didn't say anything about it because he'd done the exact same thing. If Todd was finally defining what he wanted to do with a girlfriend and what he wanted to do with Neil, then so what? Yeah, so what? Neil didn't care. He didn't care that he was touch-starved and holding back the urge to play with *Todd's* hair when they were sitting close to one another. He'd get over it. Todd

certainly didn't seem to mind too much. It wasn't big enough of a deal that anyone else had noticed like when Neil was being a freak in the fifth grade and Charlie had picked up on it. If anything, things were even more normal than before. Boys were always closer when they were little. Closer *physically* anyway, so it made sense that come Christmas the only physicality between Neil and Todd was when Todd got tackled for making inappropriate comments about Charlie's nightly tendencies.

Neil nearly regretted getting the Christmas concert cancelled because *surely* it would've been good for his father to see that Todd and him had passed that stage in their friendship. Not that Neil thought there was anything wrong with it, he was over that, but if that's what it took to convince his father that maybe Todd could come over during the summer, then so be it. He could think like a bigot. He spent a lot of time around Cameron nowadays anyway. And it was even easier in application to himself because he hated the thought of him being anything *but* straight. Because... he just wasn't allowed to be. Anyone else could do whatever they wanted and Neil didn't care. For the love of god Charlie had *finally* confessed that he had had a crush on Knox since the god damn fourth grade and Neil had felt like a fan girl.

But then Charlie explained why he had kissed Todd. Neil felt his earlier jealousy and he was disgusted at himself again. He found himself coming up with plenty of angry reasons why Charlie kissing Todd had been unwarranted and unnecessary. Apparently it had been because *Knox* had stopped kissing Charlie (no surprise to Neil that it had been happening in the first place. He'd been there during that spin the bottle game) and Charlie was worried that he'd suddenly become a bad kisser, so he went to Todd to prove himself wrong, which certainly did not make anything better. That meant that not only had they kissed longer than Todd and Neil had, but that Todd was actively looking for compliments to grant Charlie after it was finished.

And that wasn't even the worst of it! He was jealous about that and he was jealous when he heard for sure that Charlie and Knox had kissed because *he* had kissed Knox. And Knox's kiss was tender and made him feel special and now *Charlie* was getting that? He was able to push that one aside, maybe just say it was because he missed kissing his girlfriend. He missed being kissed. That was it. He wasn't jealous that Charlie got to feel Knox's soft kiss *on purpose* and not Neil. He wasn't. And he wasn't upset that Charlie had kissed Todd and he *wasn't* upset that Todd had stopped playing with his hair.

And he sure didn't *miss* it either. He didn't miss the feeling of Todd

subconsciously shifting closer to him or the feeling of Todd's short fingernails delicately ghosting the back of his hairline. He didn't miss the fluffiness of Todd's hair on his cheek when they were sitting next to each other and he sure didn't miss the scent of reading on a rainy day. He couldn't miss anything about Todd because Todd was still there. Todd still talked to him and laughed with him and spent time with him. So it didn't make *sense* that Neil could long for something that was right there in front of him.

That didn't mean he didn't scratch himself until he bled when thinking about where he drew the line between platonic and romantic. That didn't mean he didn't practically condition himself to feel pain when he thought about anything Todd-related that wasn't normal for him to be thinking about now that their friendship had evolved: his scent, his hair, his smile, that *stupid* dream about him in fifth grade or otherwise. Neil's legs were covered in scratches and scabs, but it didn't matter because it was Winter and he could wear pants comfortably. Nobody saw. Nobody knew except him. And that was how he wanted it to stay. Nobody needed to know that he was basically putting himself through homemade conversion therapy and nobody needed to know that by the time second semester started, Neil had succeeded in making himself *scared* at any thought about Todd that didn't seem *bro* enough.

No one suspected it either because Neil was still smiling and Todd was still *there* and everything was as it should've been. Meeks and Pitts were secretly working on a new device, Cameron was kissing Jeffery Anderson's ass, Charlie and Knox were doing whatever weird shit they always did, and Neil and Todd—well, they were just that. Just Neil and Todd. Just two bros being dudes. Just one boy suppressing the possibility of a fluid sexuality and another boy hopelessly suppressing his love for the first boy. As it should've been. Of course, Neil didn't know about the second part no matter how obvious it had to be at certain times… because why would anyone like him? Especially anybody like Todd? Todd deserved better than him, so Neil kept his 'ignoring every sign that Todd has a crush on me' glasses on during most times of the day, taking them off only to put on his 'reasons why you are straight and a disappointment' contacts during the night time.

Also, Neil didn't like Todd, and that was the truth. He was protective over Todd and he *loved* Todd more than anything, but he didn't like him like that. In fact, Neil was so sure that if he *did* like Todd like that it would probably be the only thing to tip him over and finally convince himself that he was not a heterosexual teenager. But he didn't. He liked touching Todd and looking at Todd, but he didn't *like*

Todd, which nearly seemed impossible. He thought about that too. There was no way he could look at Todd the way he did and *not* have a crush on him, but he just didn't, and that was the one straw of reason Neil had left to cling onto to keep himself dangling in the life of a straight young male. He didn't like Todd because he had liked Mira. He had dated Mira. He had kissed Knox and wanted to do it again (that reason was shoved deep in Neil's gut, however). He'd heard Charlie the last night of sixth grade and... well, we all *know* what Neil did the last night of sixth grade. All of that. He wouldn't be able to do any of that if he did like Todd.

If he liked Todd, he would not have eyes for anyone else. He wouldn't have developed a crush on Mira. He wouldn't of liked kissing Knox (for all intensive purposes he *didn't* regardless). And he sure wouldn't have *you know* in the sixth grade because of Charlie.

No. Neil knew the difference between platonic and romantic when it came to his feelings about Todd. Not about his actions toward Todd or anything else in his god damn life, but he knew that, for sure, he did not have a crush on Todd Anderson.

His only qualms about himself were about if he was *straight* (which he *was*) and that was *it*.

Neil Perry did not like boys.

Neil Perry did not like Todd Anderson.

Neil Perry did not allow himself to be a failure.

Neil Perry was Welton's straight, smart, perfect golden boy.

Neil Perry was everything his father wanted him to be.

Neil Perry was anything but a disappointment.

Except he only believed about half of that, which was why he bled in the shower and hid boxes and boxes of band-aids in his desk drawers. He would give his DIY conversion therapy an A+ for making him scared of gay thoughts, but he would give it an F in preventing gay thoughts. He was convinced he was straight, but he was also convinced that he had some sort of disorder in his brain that was preventing him from graduating from his stupid self-made conversion therapy.

But he was working on it.

Chapter End Notes

guys okay listen i hit 3000 words and i was like okay not enough so i wrote 2000 words of neil being in absolute turmoil and i just — im sorry!!

love all of you <3 comments are amazing

Seventh—Habit

Chapter Summary

Neil starts smoking.

Chapter Notes

CW// smoking, internalized homophobia, suicidal ideologies

TW// explicit mentions of self-harm, self-harm affecting those around, implied mentions of suicide

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil threw away the joint he had been gifted in sixth grade. He had absolutely no use for it then, and he couldn't see himself having any use for it later. All he knew was that if he got caught with it, his expulsion was not going to be pretty. However, cigarettes were a different story.

The first time Neil actually smoked was during PeeksMitts week—good god, that name got stupider with every passing year—because Charlie had bummed a whole pack off of an older boy. None of them knew why, but Charlie said that he wanted to try something new that year, and apparently a nicotine addiction is what he wanted to try. He had pulled out the pack while they were in the attic telling ghost stories and made a whole show of lighting up the first one with a lighter he had stolen. Of course, his dramatics were unceremoniously interrupted when it became clear that Charlie had no idea how you were supposed to smoke a cigarette, but eventually he got the hang of it, even learning how to blow the smoke out of his nose.

Basically everyone else opted out of trying it except for Neil. There was something appealing in it to him—being able to destroy his insides in a way that was not only normalized, but glorified. He took the cigarette from Charlie and took a long drag, feeling his throat absolutely burn with the coughing attack he was sure to have after he had exhaled. It was painful and Neil could no longer see the appeal in it, and he swore he was probably never going to do it again.

Probably.

The second time Neil smoked was the week *after* PeeksMitts week (you see how it sounds stupider the second time?). Charlie had kept

his oh-so-precious pack of cigarettes hidden under his mattress—Neil had seen him hide them there—and used them sparingly over the next couple of months. But the week after Pitts' and Meeks' birthday, Todd was in Neil's room, asking if Charlie had already smoked up that whole pack and if they should've been concerned about paying his hospital bills when he got lung cancer.

Neil had told him no and that they were sitting under Charlie's bed waiting to destroy his lungs. Then Todd had fallen silent. Neil knew something had to be up, so he straightened up on his bed and waited for Todd to turn around from where he was sitting at Neil's desk. Once he did, Neil asked, "What about it?"

"Nothing," Todd shrugged, "I was just wondering."

Neil squinted at him, knowing that was not the truth. "Todd..."

"What?" Todd asked and looked over his shoulder again, seeing the expression on Neil's face. "Stop looking at me like that! It's nothing."

"What is it?"

"You're *so* annoying."

"What is it?" Neil repeated, "Tooooddd, tell me what it is."

"Was it that bad?" Todd asked, "When you did it?"

Neil didn't really know the answer to that, so he went with, "No, not too bad. Why?" When Todd kept silent again, Neil continued talking. "Did you—did you wanna try?"

"Maybe..." Todd said quietly, "But I don't like it when my throat burns."

"Most people don't."

"Shut up."

"You know, Toddsie," Neil started and scooted to the edge of his bed so he could be right next to where Todd was sitting. "You don't have to do it just cause me and Charlie did... or cause it's 'cool' or whatever."

"Thas' not why," Todd shook his head, "I just kinda wanna see what it feels like. Without burning my throat, preferably."

An idea struck Neil's mind. Something he had seen Josh and Avery do during the summer when they had only had one cigarette. Neil didn't know how Harley was allowing it because it looked so intimate, but it was the only way Neil knew to suggest to Todd if he wanted to try without choking on heat. He told Todd to wait a second and then got up to dig under Charlie's mattress for the pack. Once he found it, he dug through Charlie's drawers for the thieved lighter and then he sat back on the edge of his bed while Todd watched him carefully pull one cigarette out of the group.

He put it in his mouth and let it hang from his lips, lighting the very end of it and checking the door one more time to make sure that it was closed. Inhaling, he felt the burn that Todd was trying to avoid and he completely understood why he *would* want to avoid that. Neil only dealt with it because the pain was thrilling. He liked feeling an effect of such an action. He was breaking the rules and he *already* felt the consequences of it. It kind of removed the anxiety of waiting for a punishment after doing something bad. Todd's lips parted slightly while he watched Neil's eyelids flutter as he let the smoke out of his mouth, nearly forgetting what was happening.

Neil saw Todd shake his head, but he had no idea why he did it. He waved his hand in front of his face, airing out the smoke Neil had so graciously blown there, and then looked at his friend. "Is that supposed to be helping me?"

"I've an idea," Neil said, "Just trust me."

Ever since they had stopped being so physical with each other, every physical thing they *did* do would cause a tingle through Neil's bones. The kind of excitement when you went to an amusement park. The most they'd done since Winter break was sit next to each other on the grass outside, so *this*—what Neil was about to teach Todd how to do when he barely even knew how to do it himself—it crossed about fifty different lines that both Neil and Todd had previously drawn. Neil didn't know what it was called to blow the smoke from his mouth into another person's, but he barely cared when Todd's face was so close to his that he could see his own reflection in Todd's pupil. He didn't care at all about the technicalities of nomenclature when Todd looked so... *whoa*.

Whoa was Neil's new term for when Todd looked incredibly attractive, but since they were both thirteen (and he was also straighter than a pole, if anyone was concerned), it felt strange to call him hot. He couldn't properly describe how he felt about the way Todd's lips were

so close to his without crossing into an inappropriate territory, so he simply referred to it as *whoa*.

Todd hadn't pulled back after he exhaled, and Neil wasn't about to move either. "Where'd you learn that?"

Then it hit Neil that he was looking down at Todd's lips instead of up into his eyes (miraculously, for Todd, being oblivious to the fact that *he* hadn't *stopped* looking at Neil's lips), and he shot his head away from Todd's and coughed into his hand. "Didn't learn. Jus' saw Avery and Josh do it during the summer."

Neil couldn't describe the look on Todd's face, but it was something near incredulous. "You should probably put those back before Charlie finds out."

"Charlie can suck it," Neil responded, but he did, in fact, stand up and shove all of Charlie's stolen belongings back to where he had gotten them from, making Todd laugh. He fell back down on his bed and Todd, content with having that awfully intimate experience, turned back to the Science homework he had come into Neil's room to do. Charlie was in his room, either playing tonsil tennis or regular tennis with Knox, and Todd actually wanted to pass science class, so he had left them there to do what they pleased. Thinking about it, Neil's mind drifted to a question he'd had since he'd broken his ankle (which was fully healed now, but delicate), and he figured he could ask it. It didn't seem *too* weird. "Was Charlie a good kisser?"

He thought it might've made Todd uncomfortable, but instead Neil saw a smirk grow on his face and he knew what kind of answer he was about to get. "Why do you wanna know? His nightly routine reeling you in?"

"No," Neil said flatly, "I wanna know if I should be saving Knox right now."

"Oh, Knox is *fine*," Todd said dramatically.

"So that's a yes?"

Todd rolled his eyes. "That's a 'Knox has different taste than me including the fact he is attracted to another gender.'"

"Right..." Neil nodded and leaned back on his bed, attempting to relax. "Right."

The third time Neil smoked, it was the end of February. He had simply been walking with Cameron to his debate practice when he was approached by Jeffery Anderson. Nothing too bad happened—nothing bad at all by some people's standards—but to Neil, the absolute worst thing had just happened. Jeffery had asked him to come back to debate, and he didn't want to. At all. But if word got back to his father that he had rejected such an offer... he would be twice as dead as last summer. Turning down good opportunities was ten times worse to Neil's father than just simply losing them.

He'd said no very quick. Almost too quick that Jeffery might've started to suspect that Neil didn't like him or something, and then he'd bid Cameron goodbye and staggered back to his room. Charlie was already in there reading a magazine—it wasn't an x-rated one, so Neil had no idea *what* kind of mag it was—smoking his bi-weekly cigarette. He'd become attached to those things after the first one, and Neil *did* worry about him. Just a little bit, though, and only when he himself wasn't desperate for a smoke. He scared the shit out of Charlie, however, and he nearly set their room on fire with his newly lit cigarette.

"Neil Perry!" Charlie yelled, scolding, "Do you know anything about knocking?"

"I don't need to knock to get into my own room," Neil said and quickly shut the door behind him, hoping that the smoke hadn't had time to sneak through the open crack. They'd be screwed if Hager smelt it. "So obviously if I'm not knocking it's me. Or any of the other boys. Baby."

"I am *not* a baby," Charlie said and pointed at Neil, then slid the cigarette back in his mouth. "Babies don't smoke."

"Well, you look like a baby."

"Then call Knox a—"

"Stop," Neil interrupted, "Stop. Don't say that. Close your mouth, and then don't talk for fifty years."

Charlie glared at him and Neil saw the end of the cigarette light up as he took a breath. Then he pulled it from his mouth and pointed at Neil again, smoke flying out of his mouth while he was talking. "I don't gotta listen to you."

"I could tell on you." Neil crossed his arms.

Charlie sat up completely. "Are you *threatening* me?"

"I'm blackmailing you, yeah," Neil said, "Give me one."

"No way, man," Charlie said, "Fuck you."

"Fuck *you*," Neil responded and jumped on Charlie's bed, tugging the pack from Charlie's pocket while he tried to fight Neil off. It wasn't successful for either of them really, but in the end Neil had gotten complete hold of the pack. "Gimme one."

"I'm running low!"

"Then get more!" Neil shouted. Charlie attempted to climb over him to get his pack, but Neil held his arm out so far that Charlie couldn't reach, turning his face to stick a cigarette in his mouth so Charlie couldn't immediately pull it out. Then he threw the pack in Charlie's face, slightly assaulted him to get the lighter, jumped over the ending frame of Charlie's bed, and landed on the ground to light his cigarette. Once he did so, he looked up to see Charlie leaning over the edge, glaring at him. Neil threw the lighter up. "Here."

"You don't need to *bully* me for something I totally would've given you."

Neil savored the feeling of his throat absolutely on fire and sighed out his drag of smoke. "Shut up."

Charlie tilted his head. "Rough day, buddy?"

"No," Neil lied and looked down at the cigarette in his hand, suddenly hating this habit he'd developed. His father would kill him, but fuck if it didn't make him feel better to smoke. He knew he needed to find a new habit to replace his self-destroying ones, but he didn't know what. That habit used to be Todd, and, somehow, Todd had just stopped being Neil's habit. His habit *used* to be watching Todd alphabetize his books, organize his closet, or any other chore he felt he needed to do when Neil was around, and now it just wasn't. Todd didn't do any of that stuff with Neil around anymore. All of it was already done, so Neil transferred to smoking and scratching. "Just wanted a smoke."

"Right, yeah," Charlie said, obviously tremendously unconvinced, "Neil Perry just *wanted a smoke*."

"What's so unbelievable about that?" Neil asked, "Most people smoke."

"You're not *most people*, Neil," Charlie said, "So what's up, my man?"

"Nothing!" Neil insisted, "I'm fine, seriously."

"I don't think you've been fine all year, man."

Neil sat up and looked at his friend with a look of anger. "What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"I know you think I'm like *perfect* and all," Charlie said, and Neil couldn't punch him because it actually seemed like he was being serious. He slid down off of his bed and leaned against it, and Neil couldn't even see him anymore. It was never a good thing when Charlie was talking and he didn't want you to see him. "But I know what it's like. I have my days."

"Sorry," Neil said, simply because he had no idea what else to say. He didn't know what was about to happen, but Charlie sounded more serious than ever, and Neil was afraid he was going to look incredibly stupid in front of his roommate who was still twelve. Neil was a *teenager*. He didn't need people doing stuff like this to him. He could handle it perfectly fine on his own. He'd found his ways—his *habits*. He was dealing with it just fine and he didn't need, or want, anybody else's help, especially not Charlie's.

"Shut up, man," Charlie said at his insincerity, "How dumb do you think I am?"

Well, Neil had certainly not expected that. "What?"

"Do you think I'm stupid?" Charlie repeated, and Neil saw his head peek around the corner for just a second. "Do you think I know nothing about the world, Neil?"

Neil completely sat up and was about to scoot over to where Charlie was, but he felt like he shouldn't, so he stayed tucked in the corner made by Charlie's bed and desk. "No. I didn't say that."

"You didn't say it," Charlie responded, "But you sure must fucking think it. You can wear pants and hide things from everyone else, but I *live* with you. You change in here. I see shit, Neil. I just haven't brought it up. I thought you'd stop."

Neil's blood ran extremely and entirely cold. This felt horrible—*he* felt horrible—and it wasn't even because Charlie sounded so devastated. It was because he'd let himself get caught. Then he felt bad about *not*

feeling bad that Charlie's voice was breaking, so in general he felt like a pile of shit. "Charlie, it's not—"

"Look, Neil, I know the fucking difference," Charlie said angrily, "Stop treating me like I'm stupid. *You're* stupid, man. You can't do that shit. You can't yell at Todd for doing that shit and then do it yourself. You're the epitome of hypocrisy."

Neil looked around the corner, seeing that Charlie was staring straight ahead with his knees wrapped in his arms. "Are you *mad* at me?" God, he *was* a hypocrite.

"Yes, I'm fucking mad at you!" Charlie yelled, "You're my best friend. We spend so much time together and you still tell me *nothing*. You never tell me when anything's wrong, and then you go and do that. Just talk to me, Neil!"

"Charlie, it's not—" Neil choked on a breath and he realized he was very close to crying. "It's not that easy, and it's not like *that*. I just fall over during soccer a lot, you know that."

"I know what a scrape from *falling* looks like and what a scrape from *scratching* looks like," Charlie ranted, "You shouldn't be doing this shit, and I'm not gonna let you steal my cigs if it's just another excuse to hurt yourself. None of the other boys either. I'll tell em' to cut you off, so talk to me."

"Don't you think I would if there was something to talk about!?"

"No, I don't, Neil!" Charlie said, "You haven't told anyone anything about how you're feeling since fourth-fucking-grade. Not me, not Knox, not even Todd, man. We worry about you. I don't know why you think we're so dumb."

"I *don't* think you guys are dumb," Neil insisted, "I just think I'm not worth worrying about."

"Bull*shit* you're not worth worrying about!" Charlie said. Then suddenly it was quiet. There was nothing Neil had to say because Charlie was right, and he didn't like arguing with Charlie when he was right because it could get bad. This conversation was already pretty bad, and Neil was trying to do his best not to let it get worse. Either way, everything Charlie was saying was true. Sometimes Neil said stuff: that he was scared of his father or that he was going to miss his friends, but he never told anyone how badly he hated himself or the sleepless nights he'd had worrying his father was going to come up to

his room and kill him. He hadn't told anyone that he hated the thought of himself being gay. He hadn't told anyone anything that actually mattered, and it was slowly killing him. Charlie ran his hands through his hair and Neil heard him sigh. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't—I'm sorry. I just worry about you. That shit looks painful. I don't want you to do that."

"Don't apologize," Neil said quietly, "You're right."

"I don't wanna be," Charlie said.

"Well, you are," Neil said and then wiped under his eye. He was trying a new thing where he didn't cry like a baby every time something went wrong, but he was failing. He dryly laughed. "I'm a mess."

"We're all messes, Neil," Charlie said, "But separate garbage from separate houses still all end up in the same dump eventually." He finally looked around the corner and waited for Neil to realize he was being looked at then he said, "Stop trying to recycle shit that can't be recycled."

"Did you *just* come up with that?"

"I did, actually," Charlie said proudly, "Good, right?"

"I mean, amazingly, yeah," Neil agreed, "Got your point across pretty well."

"Gotta love metaphors," Charlie sighed in content for a second, but then realized they had navigated away from his point. However, he stayed silent for another few moments and Neil could *feel* him pursing his lips with the thought process of a Greek philosopher. "I'm gonna tell Todd."

"No," Neil said so fast his brain didn't even register that he was about to say it. "You can't tell Todd."

"He's not your mom, Neil," Charlie said, "He's not gonna ground you."

"He's gonna be—" Neil sputtered, "You can't tell him."

"I'm telling him."

"Why?"

"I love you, that's why," Charlie said, "But no matter how much I love you, Todd loves you fifteen times more. If you think *I'm* mad about

you keeping things from us, can you imagine how he feels?"

Neil didn't want to imagine how Todd felt because that would make everything worse. "It's still not this easy, Charlie."

"It's pretty simple," Charlie said, "I'm not telling you that you have to stop being sad or that you have to stop *thinking* about hurting yourself. I'm just telling you to stop doing it. You can do that. It *is* easy. Don't tell yourself it isn't."

"You don't get it."

"I get it entirely," Charlie argued, "I told you... I have my days."

Neil only nodded, noticing then that the cigarette he had fought so valiantly for was laying on the floor next to him extinguished. He only sighed at the fact that it had burned out, thinking maybe that it was a good thing. A nicotine addiction surely wouldn't help him with anything. But then Charlie bent his hand around the edge of his bed with the open pack of cigarettes in his hand.

"Want another?"

The fourth time Neil smoked was a week later. It had been a bad week. A week of delicate silence between him and his friends. Charlie had told *all* of them, and now they were all acting like Neil was about to break—like he was seconds away from scratching his heart out. Pitts and Meeks invited him over to listen to radio, Knox hugged him every chance there was, and Cameron just didn't say the stuff that nobody liked to hear him say. Usually, he would just say it, but now that they were babying Neil, he had decided to give selective silence a try. Of course the worst of it was Todd, who didn't avoid Neil, but sure didn't wanna talk to him either.

He wouldn't run away when Neil entered the room, but he would stay silent and ignore his presence. So a week later, Neil was sitting on Knox's bed while Todd angrily did homework across the room. He lit one up, and it caught Todd's attention immediately. Without even looking over his shoulder, he said, "Are you serious?"

"Oh, are you talking to me now?"

"I don't wanna hear it, Neil," Todd snapped, "Put it out."

"No," Neil said.

"Yes."

"No."

"Neil." Todd finally turned around, and whereas Neil expected a very angry look, he saw that stupid look of betrayal and sadness he'd become all too familiar with. "I'm serious. Put it out."

"And *I'm* serious. I already lit it. I'm not gonna waste it," Neil responded, "I just like smoking, Todd, I'm not trying to suffocate myself."

"Why would you even say that?"

"Because that's what you think, right?" Neil asked and leaned forward on his knees. "That I'm doing this to kill myself?"

"Neil, *stop*," Todd begged, "Please just stop."

Neil found himself falling back at the desperation in Todd's tone. He took one last inhale of the cig and then put it out on the bedpost, waving away the smoke he'd created. "Sorry."

Todd was silent for a moment, but then he very, very quietly said, "You can't leave me."

Neil was alert. "What do you mean *leave* you? I—I would never leave you. Ever."

"I used to believe you," Todd said, "I thought I was enough to make you not want to, but—"

Neil didn't let that train leave the station. "You are enough."

A tear fell from Todd's eye and he quickly wiped it away. "I don't think so, Neil. I think this is my fault."

"Your... *your* fault?" Neil sputtered, "How could this— No. No, not at all. This has nothing to do with you." Neil hated that it was sort of a lie. It kind of *did* have to do with Todd, but it wasn't *because* of Todd. It was just because of what Neil thought about him. It was no one's fault but his own, and it hurt even worse to hear Todd blaming himself. Of course, Todd didn't look convinced in the slightest. "Todd, I swear. It doesn't. You gotta believe me."

"I don't know if I can believe you anymore," Todd said, "I mean— you kept this from me, from all of us, and you're *still* being secretive."

"Well, what do you wanna hear?" Neil couldn't help the annoyance creeping up into his tone. He knew he was being secretive, and he knew it was bad, but somewhere in his brain he didn't like being accused of it. "How much can it help to tell you all how much I wanna die all the time?"

Todd did not like that answer at all, and Neil was sure he would've proceeded to just ignore him if he didn't care so much. Damn Todd Anderson for always caring so much. "I don't know, Neil. I don't. I'm not a therapist—I'm not *God*. But I thought I was your friend."

"You are my friend."

"Then why won't you let me help you?"

Neil fell back against the wall and he wanted nothing more than to slide under Knox's blankets and disappear into the darkness, but he could barely move. The answer was Neil didn't think he deserved the help. If Neil didn't think he deserved any of what he was putting himself through, he wouldn't have been doing it. And he didn't want anyone to try to convince him otherwise because he knew it would irritate him. He knew what he deserved if anything. But then again, he was a raging, humongous hypocrite. If the rolls were reversed—if it was Todd and not him—he would probably lock him in a closet until he admitted that he was the best.

"I'll stop," Neil said, "But you all have to stop trying to go all doctorate on me. Deal?"

"No," Todd said, "There is no *deal* here. You stop *and* you start talking to us."

"Oh yeah?" Neil challenged, "Or what?"

Todd bit his lip. Obviously he had no rebuttal to that because it's not like he was going to threaten Neil to never talk to him again because how in the world would that help? The lack of response made Neil smirk, and the smirk made him realize that he was a fucking dick. He could put himself through whatever he wanted to put himself through, but if it affected Todd... he had no right. And he sure didn't have a right to be this cocky about it either.

"I'm sorry," He said instantly, "I'll stop. I'll—I'll *try* to talk to you guys, but I can't make any promises."

Todd continued staring at the ground. "Okay. That's good. Thank you."

It didn't really feel like a *you're welcome* moment to Neil, so he didn't say anything. He threw the lighter around in his hand as Todd accepted that the conversation was over and turned around to resume his science homework. Neil stared at the back of his head and tried to think of anything to say to him right then. Anything about what he was feeling or anything that might've made Todd start to trust him again, but he couldn't. He thought of plenty of things that he felt like shit about, but none of those things were things that he could tell Todd. But he'd only said he'd try, and he was trying.

He was *working on it.*

Chapter End Notes

> hello friends!! i was on vacation and ive had this chapter sitting in the drafts for a bit and haha i actually do not like it that fucking much but seventh grade is coming to a close soon so i have to make neil suffer.
>
> love u comments <3 they've been increasingly sweet lately and i rlly do appreciate it. yall say u check ur emails for updates but i check my email for comments. i love u guys.

Seventh—The Axe Man of New Orleans

Chapter Summary

As usual, Charlie's birthday calls for some tense moments.

Chapter Notes

CW// implied internalized homophobia

TW// mentions of self-harm

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil hated the rain. Absolutely hated it. He didn't know what it was about it. Definitely not the fact it made his clothes wet, he'd jumped in too many lakes to complain about that. Definitely not the fact it got his practices cancelled, he loved it when that happened. Definitely not the smell of it, nobody hated the smell of rain, but there was something about it that made him absolutely hate rainy days. Which was why he was not having a good time the night of Charlie Dalton's birthday. Of course, Charlie's birthday was always met with something extraordinarily extra. This time the boys had snuck off of Welton grounds all the way to the nearest town to watch a nighttime jazz band that Charlie had about fifty posters for.

Charlie had been gifted a miniature saxophone once it was discovered that it was his birthday, and that was all well and good until Neil discovered that the tiny instrument actually made sounds and unsuccessfully tried to hide that fact from Charlie. The rest of the night Neil wished he was deaf because the riffs Charlie was trying to replicate sounded less like jazz and more like a symphony of screeching lizards. Neil didn't know what lizards would sound like if they screeched, but he did imagine it had to be close to the notes Charlie breathed out into his mini-saxophone.

And of course, for one reason or another, Charlie had a bunch of random knowledge that he remembered the second jazz had been brought up. None of them ever wanted to know about the Axe Man of New Orleans or the fact that Charlie agreed with the sentiment of his horrifying jazz-enthused letter that he had sent to police, but now they knew. It was genuinely disturbing how much about serial killers Charlie Dalton knew, but Neil wasn't about to say anything. He wasn't about to be the first victim of an unsolved killing spree because he

was sure if Charlie *did* decide to be a murderer that he would never get caught.

Charlie had just finished his rant about the woman who was attacked, survived, and then gave birth to her child and was starting his new rant about another badass woman in the case when lightning had illuminated the sky and made the plethora of storm clouds very, very clear. Then Charlie thanked God for the birthday present because Charlie Dalton loved the rain. Neil was sure if God did have anything to do with the storm that He had probably intended for the lightning to strike Charlie dead, but he decided not to ruin Charlie's happy mood. That was a hard thing to do anyway, especially when he was skipping and kicking up puddles of rain.

Neil was, of course, less enthused. He had tried to subtly urge his friends to walk a little faster before the light sprinkling turned into torrential downpour, but unfortunately all of his friends were idiots and that didn't work out. So Neil ended up soaked, pouting, and trying to hide under anything he could find. Luckily for him, Todd wasn't too happy either because Todd loved the rain, but he hated being in wet clothes. *Un*luckily for him, Todd became more flexible and actually started having fun with the other boys. His clothes were already wet, he said, so why not?

Neil didn't share this sentiment. No matter what. He hated the rain. He didn't even tolerate it when he was safely inside a building, let alone when he was outside in it with his hair stuck to his face. It got even worse when the boys discovered that they were locked out of Welton and couldn't get inside while as wet as they were. Firstly, it was just hard to do anything while soaked, and secondly, they would leave behind too much evidence to let staff know that someone had snuck out that night. Considering it was the night of Charlie Dalton's birthday, the perpetrators wouldn't be hard to find, and Neil was not in any place to end up in trouble.

So there he was, pressed up against the brick wall, in soaking wet clothes, watching his friends have the time of their lives while he craved the sweet release of death. He just wanted to shower and go to sleep. That was all he wanted. Neil hardly ever got what he wanted.

"You look like you're having a great time." Todd appeared in front of him and, of course with Neil's luck, he had his wet hair pushed over his head and *slicked back*—Neil's ultimate view of when Todd was utterly and extremely *whoa*.

"I am," Neil said, "How could you tell?"

"Definitely the scowl on your face," Todd responded, "Dude, you might as well just have fun."

"I can't have *fun*," Neil responded dramatically, "Rain is stupid. I hate the rain."

"Yeah, I know," Todd rolled his eyes, "But you might as well try."

"No," Neil said.

"C'mon," Todd said and grabbed Neil's wrist, but Neil practically hissed at him when even a couple more rain drops landed on him. Todd dropped his hand and stared at him. "What are you? A cat? Stop being stupid."

"I am stupid," Neil insisted.

"Not as good a defense as you think it is."

"Just leave me alone, Todd," Neil complained, "I want to sulk."

"Whatever." Todd rolled his eyes again, then when Neil's guard had dropped even the slightest bit, Todd grabbed his wrist again and dragged him right out into the rain. Neil could've punched him or tackled him, but right as he was about to do either of those things he saw the smile on Todd's face and decided not to. However, he still shook the water out of his hair like he was a dog, and even if Todd was already covered in sky water, the second he was covered in *Neil* water, he got annoyed and *he* ended up tackling *Neil* to the ground. Neil could've thrown up at the gross sound of squishy grass when they landed, but he was much more focused on the fact that Todd was on top of him. He lost sight and thought of all his other friends. "What?"

Neil snapped back into it and saw that Todd was staring at him. "Huh?"

"Stop looking at me like that."

"Like what?" Neil was beginning to hate when Todd said that to him because he had no idea what he meant when said it. 'Like what?' was always the question Neil asked and every single time he got the same answer.

"Like—I don't know, just stop it," Todd complained.

Neil wasn't sure whether or not he 'stopped' it, but he didn't really know *what* was going on in his brain. All he knew was that he definitely wasn't thinking about how he could kiss Todd right then and how easy it would be to put his hand on the back of his neck and bring their faces together. He was not thinking about how bright Todd's eyes looked in the dark and definitely not anything *inappropriate* about the fact that Todd was literally sitting on top of him right then.

Once again, these were things he was *not* thinking about.

He didn't move either. He didn't *want* to move, and it didn't seem like Todd wanted to move either, but when Charlie walked over and stood right over Neil's head, Todd sat up, sitting on Neil's stomach.

"Get up, Mr. Perry," Charlie said, "Unless you wanna be scrubbing black boards for the rest of the year."

"Oh, shut it." Neil grabbed onto Charlie's ankle and pulled him forward, causing him to knock Todd right off of Neil and also kick Neil right in the face. Neil held his nose in pain while Todd pushed Charlie off of him and into the wet grass next to them, hard enough that more water splashed over all of them. Not that it really mattered considering they were all absolutely soaked anyway. Neil's hair was entirely drenched and covered in mud and he'd barely noticed when he'd been on the ground, but now he was way too aware of it.

"Good down there, Neil?" Knox appeared over his head next and Neil looked up at him and shook his head. "Alright. Come on, buddy." He grabbed onto Neil and dragged him up off of his feet, wringing out his clothes that were hanging loosely from his skin. Of course, Neil did not like the sound of that wrung-out water landing on the grass and eventually Knox stopped and just patted him on the shoulder and walked away, finding more motherly duties in Meeks and Pitts—who Neil couldn't *see* but could *hear* doing something wrong in the dark.

Todd successfully pawned off Charlie's annoying behavior to Cameron, who had been invited to the party as an anti-birthday present, and returned to bother Neil into having fun. Neil was still not having any of it, but at least they hadn't ended up on the ground this time. They'd just ended up whining back and forth at each other. Eventually Todd sighed—that defeated sigh Neil often heard when he was about to get his way—and said, "Wanna make a deal?"

"No," Neil said.

"Come *on*," Todd begged, "You're being boring. I thought you weren't boring."

"I'm *not*," Neil said, "I just have my limits."

"Limits? Really?" Todd asked, "The *rain* is your limit?"

"Well—" Neil stopped himself and crossed his arms. "You know what, Todd? Shut up."

"Do you at least want to *hear* the deal?"

"You can say it," Neil responded, "Doesn't mean that I'll respond."

"Okay. Come out here and hang out with me in the rain..." Todd started, "And I won't complain at all when you drag me to take a shower later."

Neil wanted to ask how Todd could be so sure that he was going to do that, but that answer was already clear. Any time they got relatively dirty, Neil got very excited to take a shower. He really did like showers an unnatural amount, but it was okay because Todd dealt with it. He dealt with it at the expense of Neil's ears because he always whined for hours and hours and hours before and after it. So while it may not have seemed like a great deal on Neil's part—it was. Because Todd was so annoying when he wanted to be. Neil agreed to these terms and let himself be dragged deeper into the rain. The moon wasn't very full, so he couldn't exactly see anything in front of him, but he *felt* it all. He felt the rain pelting his skin and he felt the gross grass under his feet and he felt Todd, so even though everything was all in the dark, it was okay because he felt Todd.

And everything was always okay with Todd.

So besides himself, Neil prevented the rain from ruining his mood. It was still slightly ruined. He still hated the fucking rain, but for that moment, *just* that moment, he could appreciate it. He could appreciate how it made standing with Todd outside somehow significantly better than if it was simply a still night or a sunny day. They didn't do much except twirl around and throw water at each other, but it had ended up being fun. So fun that Neil barely noticed when it stopped raining and Meeks was calling everyone inside as soon as they were all dry enough. It was very early in the morning by then, but they were all so soaked that a shower for each of them was necessary. No way Neil and Todd could lie their way to the better showers, so they let themselves be bothered by the other boys in the regular showers.

"Hey, Meeks!" Charlie shouted, holding a bottle of pink shampoo in his hands. He perked up an eyebrow. "This yours?"

"No," Meeks said quickly, "Not at all."

"It says it right—"

"Okay, fine it's mine," Meeks interrupted, "My sister gave it to me, but don't say anything about it, alright?"

"Slow your roll, my man," Charlie said, "I was gonna ask if I can use it. Who do you think I am? Cameron?"

"I am *right* here," Cameron said with his hands held up in defense.

"Do you guys hear something?"

Neil and Todd came to terms with the fact that they wouldn't get a better shower that night—Todd still agreed not to whine the next time they did it though—but they were still the last two in the bathrooms after all the other boys had gone off to bed. Todd was getting dressed and drying his hair on a bench while Neil brushed his in a nearby mirror. He'd failed to get all of the mud out during his shower, so he was trying to comb out the last remaining chunks. It was disgusting and he swore that he was never going out in the rain again, let alone stay in it for as long as he had.

"You're such a crybaby," Todd said while pulling on his socks. Somehow, Todd had been the fun one that night. When Neil was still objecting to letting himself have fun in the rain, he'd even hummed *Stand By Me* to try to get him to dance. It had nearly worked. Nearly. But Neil wasn't about to let himself dance in the rain with Todd. It felt too... well, it felt like *a lot* of things to Neil. "Just wash your hair again."

"But then it's still gonna be wet when I go to bed!" Neil complained, "I don't like going to sleep with wet hair."

"Oh shut up," Todd said, "Pick a struggle. Wet hair to bed or muddy hair to bed."

"Come look at all this mud in my hair, Anderson," Neil said, "And then you tell me to pick a struggle again."

Todd rolled his eyes, as he had become accustomed to doing that night, and stood up to walk behind Neil and see what he was moaning

about. Neil watched him in the mirror stride up behind him and then immediately get distracted by something on his neck. He felt a finger touch right at the top-middle of his back and he shivered like he had been doing lately when Todd touched him. Which was weird. He was used to Todd touching him, but... not anymore, he guessed. He hadn't reacted this way when Todd was clawing on his wrists outside, but this touch was far more tentative.

Neil shrugged Todd's finger off of him. "What's that about?"

"You have a scar."

"Oh." Neil reached behind his neck and felt over the rough spot himself. He had come to tolerate the scar. At first he hated it because it was a mark on his skin, but now he was covered in those, most of them self-inflicted, so he liked that one. That scar was because he was having a good time—as much of a good time you could have while being borderline drowned in a lake by your wacky best friend, anyway—and a reminder of the times near the end of the school year when he was actually happy. "I thought you'd seen that one."

"Did..." Todd's breath seemed to be caught in his throat, and Neil knew what he was thinking before he even had the time to go on.

"No," He said, "I got it from Charlie. He shoved me into the lake and nearly stabbed me through the jugular with a rock. It's nothing like that."

"Okay," Todd said, yet his tone was not as full of relief as Neil would've liked it to be. It was still worrisome. "...Okay."

"You know, Todd, I'm sorry," Neil suddenly said. He still didn't turn around, though, and he barely looked at Todd in the mirror. He didn't want to look at Todd right then, not with the way his voice sounded.

"For what?"

"For everything," Neil said, "For whatever you were mad at me for at the beginning of the year, for acting like it was no big deal when I broke my ankle, and for making you feel like you're not enough. You don't deserve any of that."

"Well, Neil..." Todd started, "You didn't do any of that on purpose. You can't apologize for that."

"Well, I am," Neil responded, "So there it is: I'm sorry. I'm sorry for this

whole thing I've caused."

"'This whole thing'?..." Todd asked, "You don't mean—Neil, *don't* apologize for that."

"But you're all mad at me cause of it," Neil responded, "No one was mad at *you*."

"Are you kidding? You were *all* mad at me!" Todd said, and Neil heard him pacing, but he was too focused on clutching the side of the bathroom sink to really care about it. "And I thought the same thing you did—that it was all my fault that you were all so pissed off! But it's not that, Neil. It's not. It's because you guys cared about me, so we're not mad at you. We're just...—It's because we care about you. It's because *I* care about you. I'm not mad at you—I never was! I'm mad at... I don't even know. The world, I guess."

Neil finally looked up into the mirror and saw Todd standing sideways and staring at the door. He looked down at Todd's right arm and asked, "Did *you* stop?"

He saw Todd bite his lip and stare at the ground. "No."

"Do you still?"

"Yes," Todd said quietly, "So I can't be mad at you. It would be insane if I were mad at you."

"*I* was mad at *you*," Neil responded, "I was *so* mad at you. I could still scream at you for it. I—There's no way I'm the only one who feels like this. You *have* to be mad at me. You hafta'."

"How about this? Who cares?" Todd said out of nowhere, "How about you stop and I stop and we both just *stop*? How about that? Does that sound okay?" Neil didn't say anything to that. He looked back down at the sink and refused to make eye contact with Todd, who he knew was now staring at him. "Neil?"

"That sounds okay," Neil finally said, "We can try that."

Then Todd forcibly turned Neil around and held out his pinky. "Promise me."

"You don't trust me?"

"I don't."

"Ouch."

"You're just gonna have to suck it up," Todd said and furthered his pinky into Neil's face. "Promise me."

Neil interlocked his finger with Todd's. "Fine. I promise." Todd didn't let Neil have his pinky back for a little bit, but eventually he let go and it was awkwardly silent again. "So... what do *you* think about the Axe Man of New Orleans?"

Todd smiled the tiniest bit. "I dunno. I think he's a serial killer."

"That's a really good observation," Neil said, "You know *I* think he was a ghost."

"Oh, shut up. He was *not* a ghost," Todd said, "All of those murders are loosely related anyway. Everyone had an axe. It's not a coincidence that people kept getting murdered by an axe."

"That doesn't make it seem like you think he's a serial killer."

"You only need to kill three people to be considered a serial killer."

"Oh, so I *am* a serial killer?"

"Shut up," Todd shoved him, and for a moment the energy in the room had resumed to the normal Neil and Todd had grown to know between one another. For a moment. That moment was hardly savored because suddenly there was a layer of tension created by what Neil could only assume was *the look* that Todd always talked about, but this time it wasn't just him. Neil couldn't explain the look, but he finally understood it. And as he always did when he was tired... he turned a little gay. However, Todd was nowhere near allowing that to happen, and then he pretended as if it was never *about* to happen. "Neil, I want sleep. Would you just finish washing your hair already?"

Neil had been very sure that right then was about to be the moment he finally kissed Todd and meant it. He was very close. His hands held either side of Todd's head and their lips were literally a *breath* apart, but Todd hadn't let it happen, and Neil kind of wanted to disintegrate. He didn't like Todd, swear to God he didn't, but Neil knew the difference between a don't-kiss-them moment and a definitely-kiss-them moment. He could thank his ex-girlfriend for that. But Todd was his best friend and a boy and *oh my god* Neil had almost kissed a boy. Purposefully. Just because he wanted to. No, he didn't want to. He was tired and caught up in the moment. Just like the Charlie situation.

Yeah, just like that. Nothing wrong with that. Everything was fine.

And he had *just* promised Todd he wasn't going to hurt himself, so he couldn't do a thing about it.

Chapter End Notes

once again idk if i like this chapter but i am slowly running out of ideas.
either way 'as he always did when he was tired, neil turned a little gay' is the best thing ive ever written ever so at least i have that
my vacation was good for those wondering and thank u for caring
i love u all <3

End of Seventh—Utterly, Entirely, Completely

Chapter Summary

Todd reflects on how difficult it is to have a crush on Neil Perry.

Chapter Notes

CW// implicit mentions of self-harm, self-hating language

TW// this is like a pre-trigger warning. the mentioned serial killer in this chapter was genuinely a vile fucking human being and his crimes were literally fucking disgusting. he's only mentioned for like two lines (including a very morbid joke) but if you are really sensitive to cases involving children, i wouldn't recommend deciding to look him up after the chapter out of curiosity or something. and if you do already know a little bit about the 'wineville chicken coop murders' feel free to skip a few paragraphs if you need to.

ive mentioned serial killers a lot as charlies random tidbits of knowledge, but this guy... i know literally just his name could bring up some bad stuff for some people so i felt like this warning was necessary.

also kind of sounds like i approve of the other serial killers ive mentioned??? h.h. holmes and the axe man were also not good fucking people obviously, but i do believe they mostly killed adults and h.h. holmes was particularly cruel but i find gordon northcott far more triggering and his cases are a little more well known so.

sorry for the super long warning, but i find it very important to not leave you guys in the dark about whats coming and surprise you with something that might potentially harm somebody.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Todd Anderson was utterly, entirely, completely, undeniably in love with Neil Perry. All that had happened was that Todd had gotten a letter in the mail while he was at the goddamn lake house. He hadn't left his room the entire time, and he wasn't even sure what he had been doing the entire time. Worrying about Neil, mostly. Trying to conjure positive thoughts and manifest some happiness into Neil's life because it was getting hard for him to sleep with the thought that Neil

was not doing alright. He nearly thought he wasn't allowed to do *anything* when it was possible that Neil was suffering. Of course, he wasn't really good at sticking to that and he ended up passing out most nights when he was trying to stay up and stuffing his mouth with food when he was trying to go on some sort of hunger strike. But he still worried, which was why he was surprised during the second week of summer when he left his room and was met with a letter being thrown at his face by an older cousin. A letter addressed from Neil Perry himself.

There were a few things that Todd was confused about. How Neil knew the address to the lake house for one and why Neil had bothered to write a letter to him this summer out of all summers for two. Both of these questions were answered when Todd opened it up and read it because *holy god damn fuck* someone had come into his room, seen the piece of paper on his desk, assumed it was a letter for Neil, and mailed it to his house. In technicality, it *was* a letter to Neil, but it wasn't something that was supposed to be *sent*. Sure, maybe Todd had nearly beaten Neil's address out of Charlie and he had written it down in case he ever got the courage to send the letter, but *really* he never planned on it. Not at all.

Lucky for him, at least it was that letter he had placed on his desk that day and not the love letter in the drawer right under. However, he still didn't consider himself lucky at all. There was a lot of stuff Todd hadn't said to Neil. None of it was bad. All of it was things that Charlie probably said to Neil right before they went to bed every night, but that was different. Charlie didn't have a repressed crush on Neil. Charlie wasn't daydreaming about running his hands through Neil's hair and kissing him on the forehead. And beyond all that: Charlie just wasn't as utterly, entirely, completely awkward as Todd was. Todd couldn't say that stuff to Neil. It was impossible, so he wrote it all down. He thought maybe one day he'd be able to, so that was why he got Neil's address and that's why he had saved it. Apparently that was a mistake.

Or it wasn't. Neil's response was everything Todd could've asked for. Todd had never read anything Neil had written before. He didn't know if Neil used proper punctuation or grammar, he didn't know the extent of Neil's written vocabulary, and he sure didn't know what Neil's handwriting looked like. It seemed so stupid. So, so, so stupid, but Todd read that letter over and over and over again because it was utterly, entirely, completely Neil. This was more Neil than Neil himself had been the whole year of sixth grade. It was a letter to Todd, but it nearly felt like he was reading an entry from Neil's diary

or something. Like Todd was his therapist and Neil had given him this instead of talking to him, and Todd liked seeing—or reading, whatever—this side of Neil. Neil didn't show this side of him to anyone. He kept it to himself, but he wrote it down for Todd.

This is a long-winded way of saying that Todd read that letter once and knew that he was never going to fall in love with someone else. It was Neil. It was always going to be Neil. There was no one else as utterly, entirely, completely perfect as Neil Perry. He didn't read the letter every day, he thought that was obsessive, but he read it when he was in a bad mood because it never failed to make him feel better. Neil never failed to make him feel better. Todd understood why Neil wanted his shirt and that reminder that someone 'like Todd' cared about him because this was... this was the best. Having a reminder that Neil Perry cared about him.

Of course this romanticized image of his best friend that he was sure wasn't romanticized and was true was crushed the second he got back to school. He was so, *so* excited to see Neil this year. It was different. He always missed Neil, but he had really, really missed him that summer. Being away from him nearly felt impossible, but Todd had done it, and he was excited to reward himself with seeing Neil, but then he overheard Charlie. Neil had a girlfriend. Neil had gotten a *girlfriend*. It was dumb, but Todd felt betrayed. Like Neil had stabbed him... well, in the heart.

He was mad at Neil. So mad at Neil. He exploded on him because he didn't want to hear at all any of the stuff Neil was saying because he just couldn't believe him anymore. He didn't want to hear it and give himself hope that maybe one day he could love Neil. He barely even had the hope he could admire him in secret anymore. That was gone. Neil was in a relationship with a girl, and Todd knew his friend, he saw the look in his eye. He was serious about it. So Todd couldn't be around him anymore. It was too hard, and it wasn't just because he talked about her all the time. It was because being around him was a constant reminder of how much Todd loved him and how he would never be able to show it.

And it utterly, entirely, completely broke Todd's heart.

It was made worse by the fact that Neil wouldn't leave it alone. Todd just wanted to phase Neil and his pathetic feelings for him out of his life, but Neil never gave it up. He would stare at Todd while he was hanging out with Charlie, tell Todd that he *loved* him when Todd didn't let him say anything else, and show up at Todd's door crying.

Somehow, while Todd was trying to avoid putting himself through hell, he was going through it anyway. Hell was watching Neil from afar have a girlfriend and not even being able to talk to him, but it was also having Neil curled up in his lap clutching onto him like he was the only thing that was real. That was the fifth circle of hell. The torture of hell. Having the boy he loved so desperately so close to him and barely being able to do anything about it. Having him right there to remind him that he could never *have* him. Todd's heart was something way past broken. It was shattered.

Neil was doing everything right. He was giving Todd the space he wanted. He was constantly reminding him that he'd never give up on him. And he was still coming to him for comfort when nobody else could comfort him. But it was still all wrong. Nothing made Todd feel better. Absolutely *nothing*. So, he hadn't *meant* to tell Charlie about his crush on Neil. Really, he hadn't. But he was in such a state that it had just slipped out, and Charlie decided that he wasn't going to let it continue anymore. He sat Todd down in a chair and made him make a choice: love Neil, not get Neil, and never talk to him again or love Neil, not get Neil, but at least still have him in his life. Todd was surprised at how in-tune with the world Charlie had become after finally coming to terms with his own shit, but he couldn't say it wasn't helpful. It was. Todd wasn't in any mood to pretend that everything was okay with Neil—not after the very prolonged stunt he was pulling—but he was in the mood to not avoid Neil anymore. To let Neil back in.

However, this of course seemed impossible when he saw Neil with his girlfriend. Mira Lancaster was... well, she was what Todd pictured Neil's type as being for sure. She loved life, she was always smiling, she was funny, and she was really, really pretty. Todd wanted to resent her, and in a way he did, but in another way he just couldn't. Mira wasn't doing this to him on purpose. So even if his heart was a whirlwind of stupid jealousy, he found it within himself to be happy for Neil and the amazing girl he'd found. She was what he deserved. Not somebody like Todd. Neil looked so *happy*. Todd was sure he'd never seen him happier.

But of course Todd was twelve and in love and his stupid emotions didn't want to see Neil happy with somebody that wasn't him. He couldn't spend time around Neil knowing that he could never make him as happy as Mira made him. He couldn't talk to Neil while Neil was probably thinking about how much fun it would be to be talking to Mira instead. So he absolutely threw away his original plan. Not avoid Neil? How was he supposed to not avoid Neil when just

thinking about Neil made him so sad? He was formulating how to keep this charade going when he was left behind by his stupid friends and Neil had come up to him and decided to pretend that everything was okay.

Todd wasn't sure what you were supposed to say about your best friend's girlfriend when you were in love with him, but he figured calling her pretty was a good way to go. He originally was going to say *perfect* or *better than me* but he had refrained from doing so. Of course, he hadn't expected Neil to immediately fire back with *you're pretty,* and even if Neil had corrected himself, Todd knew him. Todd knew he meant what he said, and it was making everything worse. He was glad when Neil changed the subject to the book because it was segueing into an excuse for Todd to run away but because it was Neil Perry—he never gave up. Todd thought he deserved to be given up on, but Neil never did, so he broke down, and Neil told him that he loved him *again*. Todd hated hearing it, and he wished Neil would stop saying it.

He also wished Neil would stop complimenting him at soccer because Todd hated playing soccer. He hated it *a lot*, but there was no way he was ever going to get out of it, especially since he was apparently so good according to Neil and everybody else. Jeffery beat the shit out of him at home when Todd tried to bring it up, and Todd did consider it borderline abusive, but he barely thought about it. He nearly took it as a compliment because Jeffery wasn't that good at soccer. He was just jealous... of Todd. For once. That did not mean that Todd wanted to keep playing soccer. He didn't care about being better than Jeffery anymore—he hadn't cared since Neil—so he wanted to quit soccer. Especially when that sport broke his best friend's ankle on his *birthday*.

Todd hated yelling at Neil. He hated arguing with Neil. But he also hated when Neil pushed aside his own pain and acted like it was no big deal. He hated when Neil was literally laying in the grass broken and still offered his hand up for Todd to chew on because somehow *he* was the one freaking out. He utterly, entirely, completely hated Neil Perry sometimes. But he was also utterly, entirely, completely worried about Neil Perry all of the time. The second he heard that his father was going to get involved with this whole thing, Todd wanted to burn the school down so the staff would have something bigger to worry about. The light in Neil's eyes always drained at the mention of his father getting involved in anything, and Todd hated the look of it. He hated Neil's dad more than he hated his own parents. He didn't understand how you could have a son like Neil Perry and still treat him the way that he did.

He also didn't understand why Neil had to bring up everything so casually all the time. Maybe *his* heart wasn't beating at a thousand beats per minute when he was laying down being read to, but Todd's was. Todd's heart had exploded at least seven separate times when he'd allowed himself to be persuaded into reading to Neil. He didn't understand why Neil liked it so much, but he still did it because it was worth it to see his calm expression. However, Todd figured that maybe he'd start hurting less if he stopped putting himself into those kind of situations. Really, he was just torturing himself when he let Neil lay so close to him. When he let his own hands thread into Neil's hair. That was all on him. Those were the things about his heartache that he could control.

He couldn't control the smugness at Neil's jealousy, however, because Neil *was* jealous when he had found out that Todd had kissed Charlie. Well, that Charlie had kissed Todd, anyway. Todd had sort of forgotten that it wasn't something that Neil knew, but when he saw Neil's angry, blank stare at the wall he kind of regretted not telling him. But still, Todd was *sick* because it made him happy that it made Neil jealous. Maybe not utterly, entirely, completely happy, but he was *happy*. Neil cared. If Neil cared about that... then *maybe*...

But Todd was still an awkward mess. That smugness never reached the surface. What did reach the surface was an immovable blush when Neil asked if Charlie had been better than him. Because *why did Neil care* and Todd really didn't want to tell him the answer, to clue him in on the fact that Todd thought about when they had kissed all the god damn time and that it utterly, entirely, completely engulfed his brain at most times. So Todd lied. He didn't know, he said, he didn't remember, he said.

And then Neil said that he had to break up with Mira and the smugness was back. He tried to act natural and hold it back, and he succeeded, but then Neil started crying and he just felt horrible that he could be happy during this time. That he could have even the slightest bit of positivity in his body when Neil was reaching out to him like he was five-year-old wanting a stuffed animal. But he was happy. He was happy that Neil could be comforted by him—that Neil *wanted* to be comforted by him. That Neil could wrap himself up into Todd's grasp and not freeze up like Todd did. That Neil never let go of the smell of book pages and rain.

And that Neil didn't seem sad *at all* that he had gotten broken up with.

He was utterly, entirely, completely happy because Neil was *his* again.

Maybe not his exactly, but... with Mira gone, Neil put Todd at the top of his priorities again. Todd didn't think he deserved this, he never did, but it still felt nice. He was finally feeling better. Sure, he could still never *have* Neil, but he was back at having the closest thing to that.

Then Neil said that he was *glad* Mira had broken up with him, and even though Todd thought it impossible, but he felt hopeful. Maybe he had a chance with Neil. Maybe he did. But, no. He couldn't let himself think that because it wasn't true. So he stopped being so touchy with Neil. The fact that Neil fell so easily into his touch was only encouraging Todd's hope and he couldn't have that, so he stopped. He fucking hated it. He fucking hated *purposefully* doing the thing that had made him so upset at the beginning of the year, but he thought that it was for the best. He needed to get this out of his system.

Todd wasn't exactly happy when Neil started smoking, but there wasn't really anything he could do about it. He couldn't say that he was upset about it either because he was kind of intrigued by it. He also thought it was kind of... whoa. He didn't really know what that meant, but he knew that he could never stop staring at Neil when he was smoking. He also didn't know where the *hell* he got the willpower to keep himself away from Neil. He hardly had the willpower to present a project in class, let alone pull himself away from the lips of the boy he was in love with. Seriously, Neil's face was *right* there. He was *blowing smoke from his mouth into Todd's*, and Todd didn't faint. He didn't faint and he didn't throw away his dignity and try to make out with his best friend. *How*? How in the *world*?

Charlie said it was probably because he was scared, and that what he'd said at the beginning of the year had stuck in Todd's subconscious. He was too scared to do anything that would repel Neil —kind of like when you really wanted to kill someone, but you were too scared of prison. That was definitely *Charlie's* metaphor, not Todd's, but Todd wasn't about to say that it wasn't an accurate comparison. But Charlie was only so useful for so long because soon he was encouraging Todd to just go for it, and Todd punched him. Charlie didn't understand that the world wasn't all requited love just because the boy *he* liked had reciprocated his face-eating. He thought it was easier than it was. Todd doubted Charlie Dalton had ever been rejected in his entire life.

He also didn't know when he and Charlie had become so close. Well, he *kind of* knew, he guessed. He'd spent a lot of time with him and Knox when he was avoiding Neil, and Charlie was the type of guy you

could just tell all your secrets to. He was like... a siren. Some sort of weird siren, but instead of luring you to your death, he kind of just lured you into telling him specific personal information. Charlie thrived off of collecting information. His brain hardly seemed smart enough to hold all of that, but Todd figured that was why he couldn't remember any math formulas. He was too busy worrying about random facts—mostly about serial killers.

Like—have you ever wanted to hear about Gordon Northcott and the chicken coop murders? Oh... no? Neither did Todd. Todd didn't want to hear about how he was "probably Gordon's type," but Charlie... who knew what was up with him. Surely he knew that he wasn't allowed to say *anything*, but that made it worse. It made him *want* to say anything even more.

Spending so much time with Charlie made Todd appreciate Neil even more, and he hardly thought that was possible. He was basically topped out on how amazing he thought Neil was, but everyday Neil continued to surprise him. There was always something. A new smile, a new laugh, a new glance—*something* that made Todd fall for him even more. He couldn't remember the last time he'd actually been angry at Neil. Like *actually* mad at him for something. Todd figured he wouldn't even be mad at him if Neil punched him in the fucking face, but he was devastated when Charlie told him about what Neil had been doing.

He cried. He hated to admit, but he cried. Neil Perry? Doing that to himself? It couldn't be true. Neil was so, so utterly, entirely, completely undeserving of that—Todd thought it impossible that it could happen, but he was naive, he decided. Bad things happened to good people. Too many bad things happened to Neil all the time, and there was nothing he could do about it. He thought, he *really* thought, that he was helping Neil. That he was *enough* to help Neil. Neil had finally convinced him that Todd was useful. That Todd was *something*. But it turned out that wasn't true, and that Neil was a liar, and Todd couldn't believe a liar—even if he didn't know that he was a liar. Todd could hardly believe he'd allowed himself to think he was good enough for Neil.

That made Todd worry about the smoking. Made him worry that it was just another excuse for Neil to hurt himself, and no matter what Neil told him—he just couldn't believe it anymore. Neil was a liar. Neil was lying to everyone. Todd, Charlie, his god damn self... so Todd always let his words go in one ear and out the other. He no longer took it to heart when Neil said that he loved him because he had no

reason to believe it anymore. He had no more reason to hope, so finally that hope he'd been trying to get rid of went away, but it didn't feel as relieving as he thought it was going to. Todd didn't know if he preferred knowing that he didn't have a chance or hoping he did have a chance when he didn't. Both of them fucking hurt.

Todd couldn't understand why Neil didn't like the rain because what was there not to like about it? It smelt good, the atmosphere was nice, and there was just something about it that always made Todd happy. He loved the idea of watching the rain in silence for hours or falling asleep to the sound of dripping water. There was nothing about rain that wasn't appealing, but yet Neil hated it. Todd wanted Neil to enjoy it with him. To enjoy some*thing* he loved with some*one* he loved. He wanted Neil to actually like one of the things they did together. Neil didn't like reading, he liked being read to. Todd didn't really like plays, but he liked going with Neil. Todd wanted just *one* thing that they both liked, and he'd be damned if he didn't try to get that thing to be rain.

Ideally, Todd would've executed this plan while inside—cuddling up to Neil on his bed while watching the window or something—not locked out of school being in soaked clothing, but he took the chances he got. He did *not* like the feeling of his wet clothes against Neil's, but he *did* like the feeling... well, it sounded weird, but he did like the feeling of being on top of Neil. And it wasn't like *that*, okay? So get your mind out of the gutter. But it felt comfortable and it felt right, and somehow it was a mutual understanding that neither of them wanted to move. Todd moved first, of course he did, but he liked the one moment where he thought maybe he'd never have to.

He liked those natural times between him and Neil. None of it was planned and it all just kind of happened. It made Todd feel like maybe the universe was rooting for him. He didn't know where he drew the line between natural and *what the fuck* but he did know that he categorized frolicking in the wet grass as natural and nearly getting kissed by the half-naked love of his life as *what. the. fuck.* You know what Todd also thought was *what the fuck*? Wimping out on kissing the guy you think about kissing daily. What was *wrong* with him? Neil was about to kiss him. *Neil* was about to kiss *him,* and Todd decided to ninja reflex his way out of that shit and then pretend that it didn't happen. Now, why had he done that?

The only thing he could think of was that it was because Neil didn't mean it. Todd was done with Neil kissing him when he didn't mean it, which sounded *so* weird and kind of ungrateful, but it was true. If Neil

Perry was going to kiss him, Todd wanted it to be because he felt the same way and he just *knew* that Neil didn't. He had no idea why, then, Neil had tried to kiss him in the fucking showers, but he didn't let it happen. He *wanted* it to happen. He would've *pounced* on Neil if he thought the moment was genuine. But it wasn't. It never would be. So he was trying to keep himself on the right side of reality, and the fact that Neil merely looked confused was a good reality check. If Todd had just been rejected, he probably would've already been crying, but Neil kind of just looked like *huh, why didn't that work*? And that was not the reaction Todd imagined Neil would have if the feelings were mutual.

So, no, Todd wasn't going to kiss him. Not unless he utterly, entirely, completely meant it.

Charlie did not share the same sentiment. "Are you insane, Todd?"

"No, I—" Todd sighed and shoved his face into his hands. He wished he knew where the urge to tell Charlie stuff was coming from because then he would've killed it. "I explained it to you."

"You explained jackshit!" Charlie said, "That doesn't make sense. If you think he's never going to like you, and then he tries to kiss you, you should fucking kiss him!"

"But only if he means it, Charlie!"

"With your logic, he'll never mean it," Charlie said, "You should take what you can get. So, I stand by my point. Are you *insane*, Todd?"

"I'm not insane, alright?" Todd shot back, "It makes perfect sense. Right, Knox?"

Oh, yeah. Useful to mention that Knox was also in the room. Todd felt no qualms about Knox knowing everything about his life because Knox knew a little too much about him already from just being his roommate, but also because Knox was just... he had no idea. Knox was Knox. He nearly liked telling Knox things. There was no real way to explain it. (If Todd were in modern times, he would be explaining it by saying that Knox was a *total* hufflepuff). However, the boys did have a tendency to annoy the shit out of him when he was working on some sort of final project. Todd didn't know what it was at the time, but Knox had barely tried to pay attention to it knowing that he was going to be pulled out of his focus anyway.

"Don't answer that, Knox," Charlie said, "He's trying to use outside

sources."

"Additional sources—reliable sources," Todd corrected, "Since you're not believing me."

"You would be declared legally insane in a court of law."

"What the *fuck* would you know about what goes on in a court of law?"

"My dad is a lawyer!"

"Oh, and you hide in his briefcase and go to work with him or something?" Todd said, "Shut up, Charlie."

"Charlie doesn't shut up," Knox mumbled, "Trust me."

"I don't need to trust you, Knox, I *know* that," Todd ranted angrily, "I'm as well-versed in the art of Charlie Dalton as you are."

Knox tilted his head and scrunched his face a little. "Not exactly."

Todd, even though he knew it probably wouldn't have been a good idea, made eye contact with Charlie, who was already smirking. "You could be if you wanted to."

"I will circumcise your ass if you try to kiss me again."

"How do you—"

"I'll figure it out!" Todd shouted, "None of this is helping—*neither* of you are helping."

"Good I wasn't trying to help," Knox said blankly, "I was trying to do Science."

"Shut up, Knox!"

"Toddsie, Todd, calm down. Take a breath," Charlie said, and Todd hardly wanted to listen to him about taking a breath when he was literally smoking a cigarette right then, but there wasn't much else he could do. "What exactly do you want us to do here?"

"I don't know."

"We could kill Neil."

"Why would that—" Todd cut himself off and exhaled very deeply to calm himself down. "Why would I want you to kill Neil?"

"Oh not for you," Charlie said and stuck the cigarette in his mouth, putting his arms behind his head. "That was just a question for me. Sonuva' bitch keeps stealing my shit. He's like a rat."

"How can you get *more* unhelpful?" Todd asked, mostly himself, actually hoping that Charlie didn't hear because he would only take it as a challenge. Truly, he had no idea what he was looking for either. Was he expecting Charlie to smack the crush out of him or something? He had no idea what to do anymore, and he was convinced that his crush on Neil Perry was going to kill him.

Todd Anderson was utterly, entirely, completely screwed.

Chapter End Notes

im gonna be honest i typed this one and posted it without reading back through so if there are things that dont make any sense im sorry ill fix it later lmAO

what band is it that had the song truly madly deeply is it one direction

it is

that song title inspired this chapter title

i hope you all enjoyed

reminder i love all of u and u all are the world. not just to me. u all are just the world in general.

Eighth—Chameleon

Chapter Summary

Neil becomes in tune with himself.

Chapter Notes

CW// homophobic themes, implications of abusive household, mentions of conversion therapy, implicit mentions of self-harm

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Self-made conversion therapy did not work as well as being bullied into acceptance.

Neil was already bad at convincing himself of things, but when everyone and their mothers (thank you, Mira, for that phrase that has stuck with him) was telling him the opposite of what he'd been drilling into his brain all year—well, his DIY conversion therapy was shut down due to safety reasons. Neil figured his summer was going to be spent being locked in his room thinking about Todd while trying not to jump out of his window, but it turned out that Harley and Josh were a smarter couple than he gave them credit for. Granted, Neil Perry was now an upcoming-eighth grader and Harley Richardson and Josh Barkley (have you ever heard two whiter names?) were in college, but Neil once saw Josh forget to open his water bottle before trying to drink out of it, so excuse him if he was a little skeptical.

They disguised the acting club as a very prestigious academic type thing. Even Avery had gotten into it, using some calligraphy skills Neil was not aware she had to draft up some royal invitation. It was such a good scheme his father barely questioned it before letting Neil go. Neil felt like such a baby because this summer was different. This summer wasn't different improv exercises and watching films to admire the virtue of facial acting—this summer was his older friends delicately walking around him as if they knew that he'd had a rough school year. Hell, the club was barely about acting. It was more them sitting in a room and dicking around, but Neil didn't mind it. Whatever got him out of his room, out of his house, out of his mind—he didn't care what it was.

He was informed that Mira had moved away, and it kind of hurt him a little bit. It hurt him more that she hadn't written him a goodbye letter

than when she had literally broken up with him over the phone, and he wondered why that was, but as usual, he thanked Mira for their time together in his mind and silently moved on. In her place was Ginny Danbury. She was Sam's friend (Avery's younger brother, in case we've forgotten), and Sam had convinced her to join in once the news broke that they were losing a valuable member. Apparently Ginny was super easy to convince because she was *early* for the next meeting, and she was... who knew what Ginny was, but she was really cool.

Neil hadn't expected her to be so cool because he knew her older brother—Chet Danbury. Chet was kind of a jerk who was definitely failing school. Neil was sure the only reason he was still in admission was because his family was kind of loaded. Also he was friends with Bryan Meyers, and Neil just had to assume that Bryan's crude list of debate topic suggestions had always had a little Chet Danbury pizazz added in them. The lists always reeked of the stench of two mentally stunted gross young boys, and that was a lot coming from Neil. He was friends with Charlie Dalton after all. But, then again, Charlie Dalton wasn't a bigot. Chet Danbury most definitely was.

Ginny Danbury was the exact opposite of that. She marched right in as a raging feminist and social rights activist and it was *so* weird because she was literally twelve. She was twelve and she had more defined, morally correct opinions than Neil had ever had in his entire life. Even weirder, she warmed up to Neil immediately, and he ended up getting closer to her *and* Sam. He hadn't paid Sam much attention the previous year, he was way too focused on Mira, but he learned that Sam was as passionate about acting as his older sister. He thought that they were gonna go to Broadway, the two of them. Avery would be the screenwriter and Sam would be to leading star, and, you know what, Neil didn't even doubt it. That's why Avery had stuck around. She was in college, but it was a close one. One that her parents definitely didn't want her to go to, but she chose to stay close to Sam until he was done with school, and Neil found that heartwarming.

Neil found that to be how an older sibling *should've* acted, but he kept that thought to himself. Nobody there was going to care if he brought it up, and it sure wasn't a good thing to be telling Todd once he got back to school.

He found himself hanging out with Ginny and Sam outside of the club, and it felt nice having friends around his age that didn't go to his same boarding school. Of course, he liked Avery, Josh, and Harley, but he also felt like they were his parents sometimes. Especially with how

they'd been treating him that summer. So it was a relief to be hanging out with Ginny and Sam and stealing ice cream and cotton candy from a nearby carnival.

Neil had always been oblivious, no matter how smart he was. That's why it took him so long to notice that Sam's stares lingered a little too long sometimes. He wouldn't have noticed unless Ginny cornered him one day after a meeting and spoke it straight into his soul that it was *so* obvious that Sam Lee had a crush on him. He was still in denial even then, but when Ginny Danbury told you something in that vicious of a manner, you sort of had to believe her. And then, for the first time ever, he let it loose how there was nothing he could do about that. He didn't like boys and the thought of it disgusted him, and he thought maybe Ginny and her progressive mindset would burn him at the stake, but that's not what happened. Instead, Ginny sat him down—*nicely* this time—and told him that that was okay. That it was valid. But that it was *not* true.

She broke it down with Neil like she was a god damn therapist. Why was it okay for someone else to be gay and not him? She asked. You don't think anything bad about Sam now that you know he likes you, right? She asked. So what is it? And they finally got to the root of it. It was his stupid family. Neil *knew* that if he were to be gay, his father would disown him and probably make his *own* homemade conversion therapy, so Neil's instincts decided to try and avoid that shit. He was doing it for his dad already, making sure he was a nice, straight boy, and preventing *the gay* as it were. And Ginny Danbury—twelve-year-old Ginny Danbury—Shut. *That.* ***Shit. Down.***

She also made Neil face the fact that trying to kiss your male best friend was in no way straight, and there was no possible way to twist it into seeming that it was. Ginny, however, agreed with the conclusion that Neil didn't like Todd, based on the sentiment that if he *did* he wouldn't have eyes for anybody else (which was met with a *Neil, I know you were in denial, but seriously, even* those *thoughts didn't make you question yourself?*). But Neil did like boys. Neil liked boys and girls, so Ginny taught him a new word. Bisexual, she called it. Well, *she* didn't call it that. Someone else had probably come up with the name, but it wouldn't have surprised Neil if it were Ginny who had done it.

And then Neil found out that the people he cared about didn't give a single fuck who he decided he wanted to kiss. Avery and Sam were just kind of like—*okay, Neil, you ready for today's activities?* Ginny, of course, had lured the confession and realization out of him, so she

acted like a teacher rewarding a student with a gold star when he came to terms with it himself—*good job, Neil, I'm so proud of you!* And Josh and Harley said nothing and had kind of just looked at him with an expression of—*Neil, we were literally kissing before you walked up. Did you expect us to shoot you or something?*

And Neil thought his life was going to change forever once he'd revealed that information, but it didn't change at all. Everything was as perfectly normal as it was before, and Neil made a revelation. He, truly, didn't give a shit what his father wanted him to do. He wanted to be his own person and his father was keeping him from that. There was nothing he could do about it, though. He still had to act the obedient son and listen to his father's every demand about what he was to do with his life, but he didn't have to about *who* he was. His father couldn't control that part of his life. That was Neil's. For once, it was *just Neil's*. Neil smoked and he snuck out and he liked *boys* and there wasn't anything his father could do about that. That was all him, baby.

It was no less depressing that everything else in his life was a byproduct of his father's manipulation, but now at least he had something. At least he wasn't lying to himself anymore and he wasn't *hurting* himself when he thought of anything that wasn't straight because *oh well.* Neil wasn't straight, he wasn't going to constantly think straight things. That was like punishing a chameleon for not staying one color. Neil was a bisexual fucking chameleon, and he knew that he had to keep it under wraps in front of most people. It wasn't something he could be outwardly proud about, and of course that thought was sad. The thought that he could be murdered just because of it, naturally that depressed him, but there wasn't much he could do about that either, and in a way, it didn't matter to him because he *knew* that the people he *actually* cared about didn't give a shit.

Maybe it would've hurt if Charlie decided to stop being his friend or something, or if Knox kicked him out of his room, or if Meeks stopped helping him with math, or if Pitts never let him touch the radio again, or if Todd never let Neil touch *him* again, but none of that happened. He wasn't met with anything like that. In general, he was met with a *good for you, Neil!* kind of vibe. That being from Knox (obviously also bisexual), Meeks (who probably knew, scientifically, that homosexuality was not a brain deformity), and Pitts (just the nicest person in the world who only hated serial killers and racists). The vibe he got from Charlie—who was a self-proclaimed *Jewish Gay Jesus* (don't ask Neil what that meant because he really didn't know) was

yeah, I know, I was just waiting for you to catch up. And that was it.

That was it because he didn't tell Todd and he didn't tell Cameron. Even though he hadn't reported Charlie and Knox to the church yet, and he was *well-aware* of what they were doing, not telling Cameron was just kind of obvious. Not telling Todd was.... well, not telling Todd was a whole different can of worms that Neil was not ready to open. Not now, not during the school year, and *not* without Ginny Danbury. But Charlie Dalton was also a self-proclaimed can opener, and he wasn't about to let it go.

"Well, do you like him?" Charlie pressed, and Neil was beginning to consider that maybe he *could* put in a new roommate request come high school. He was up to *here* with Charlie. It would probably be healthier for their friendship if Neil wasn't constantly in close proximity to fucking murdering him all the time.

"No, I don't," Neil said, "And Ginny agrees with me! So shove it!"

"Ginny this, Ginny that," Charlie mocked, "What about Neil? Does *Neil* agree with you?"

"... I agree with Ginny."

"Oh my god." Charlie put a hand to his face. "You're letting this girl—a *Danbury* no less—just tell you what you're feeling."

"Hey!" Neil shouted and stood up, pointing at him, "She helped me *a lot* during the summer, alright? And I already *knew* that I didn't like Todd. Ginny just agreed."

"Fine, fine, your summer was amazing," Charlie said, obviously uninterested. "Self-realization and all that."

Neil sat back down and sighed. "How was *your* summer, Charlie?"

"Decadent," Charlie said.

"Man, Knox was right," Neil said, "You never have a good summer." Neil thought that the way Charlie had described his last four summers oughta' be the new four pillars of Welton. Seriously! So far they had: horror, travesty, excrement, and decadence. Sounded more accurate than what they currently had, anyway. Neil couldn't remember one time any of the actual four pillars had applied to him, but he could think of thousands of times in his life that he would describe as a ginormous decadent, horrific, shitty, travesty.

"Well, I've pretty much run out of self-realizations to realize," Charlie said, "So I have nothing left."

"Is that what you think summers are for?"

"What else would they be for?" Charlie asked, "Orgies?"

"... Maybe?"

"Gentlemen!" The both of them turned to their door to see Meeks there with his hand over his heart, standing very straight up. Pitts was to his left in a similar position. “Are we ready for this year?"

Charlie stood up quickly and saluted. "Fuck no, sergeant."

Meeks patted his chest. "That's what I like to hear." Pitts looked vaguely concerned at his side. Meeks dropped his hands to his sides and looked back and forth between Charlie and Neil. Now, Knox was really the only one that could walk into a room and probably guess the exact dialogue of whatever was happening before, but when there was tension between Charlie and Neil, it was obvious, so everyone always picked up on it. He squinted at the both of them. "What's going on in here?"

"Oh let me *tell* you," Charlie said exasperatedly, "You guys know Neil, right?"

Neil looked at him. "What?"

But the two boys in the doorway responded as if that was a good question. "Yes."

"Okay, well Neil has a crush on someone," Charlie said, and Neil was about to say something, but Charlie silenced him with a very ominous glare, so he fell back against his wall and let him do whatever it was that he was doing. "Can you guess who it is?"

Pitts looked carefully at Neil and then back at Charlie. "Todd?"

"Ah-ha!" Charlie triumphantly pointed at Pitts and then whipped around to Neil. "See? You *see*?"

"What was that supposed to prove?" Neil asked, but he was kind of worried that it *had* proved something. If everybody else thought he had a crush on Todd... maybe he did? But he knew he didn't. Ginny knew he didn't. But Charlie... and everyone else apparently too? What

was going on?

Pitts was silent for a moment. "Was I right?"

"No, it was a trick question," Charlie shot him down, "Neil doesn't have a crush on anyone. Or at least that's what he *says*."

Meeks and Pitts looked at each other and Neil could tell they were trying to come up with a natural excuse to get out of there. He didn't blame them. Getting in the middle of an argument between him and Charlie was never a good thing. Meeks had tried this once and ended up with a black eye, so it was always a good idea to leave the vicinity when things seemed to be heating up between the Chaos Brothers. Charlie was still staring at Neil like he expected him to start crying with the guilt of his lie or something, but Neil just felt angry.

"I *don't*," He stood up and was face-to-face with Charlie, *finally* being taller than him after multiple years of not. Besides Pitts, he had to be the tallest, and he was perfectly okay with that. If it made him seem more intimidating for situations like these, then hell yeah. Who was he to mind? Charlie, however, was not scared of this new height difference. He just deepened his glare, so Neil repeated, "I don't."

"Whatever you say," Charlie said slowly.

"What's happening?" Knox had appeared behind the other boys, who were stuck between leaving and watching a fist-fight go down, with Todd right next to him. Neil communicated silently with Charlie that he was to immediately *drop* this subject with Todd in the room, so he did. He fell back and flopped onto his bed, telling Meeks to close the door and pulling out a cigarette from his chest pocket. Knox and Todd were shoved into the room, but both of them were still confused. "Uh... so, what's happening?"

Meeks and Pitts both shrugged. "Dunno."

Knox and Todd shared their own looks with each other, but eventually brushed it off. Maybe it would be better for them not to know. Knox stepped forward and grabbed the cigarette from Charlie, taking a drag and then handing it to Neil when he leaned forward to grab it. Neil glared pointedly at Charlie while he inhaled the cigarette, knowing that Charlie most definitely didn't want Neil's grubby hands on his precious cigs at the moment, then he coughed the smoke obnoxiously near Charlie's face and handed it back to him. Charlie looked near directing everyone out of their room so he could knock Neil the fuck out, but Knox sat next to him and it withheld his anger just enough so

that he didn't do that.

Meeks and Pitts took respective seats at each of the boy's desks and Todd sat at the other end of Neil's bed, and Neil tried not to let it get to him. Why wouldn't Todd just sit right next to where he was instead of all the way on the other side? Like Knox had done with Charlie? But he couldn't think about it too much or it would leak onto his face and Charlie would probably whip out a camera and proceed to develop the film just to shove it in Neil's face as proof. Charlie didn't understand. Neil didn't *like* Todd. He just had an unhealthy attachment to him. Two very separate concepts. Totally different.

"Chet Danbury transferred," Knox said, "My dad told me."

"Ah, the Danbury's," Charlie said and waved his cigarette around in the air. Neil tried to not make direct eye contact with him. "Wild people they are."

Knox raised an eyebrow at him. "Not really?"

"Scoundrels," Charlie went on and Neil unfortunately got locked in a staring match with him as he took another drag from his cigarette, saying his next words with smoke leaking out of his mouth, "Huh, *Neil*?"

Suddenly everyone turned to Neil and he could've punched Charlie. He was making it sound like something other than that he was friends with Ginny Danbury and had been taking her advice. He was making it sound like Neil had been engaging in a secret affair with Chet over the summer. To three out of four of his friends in there, that probably would've been their first assumption, and when Neil looked at them, that's what seemed to be happening in their minds. Thankfully, Todd just looked generally confused. Neil glared at Charlie and wanted to rip the cigarette out of his hands and put it out in his fucking eye.

"Probably," Neil finally answered, "Chet sucks."

"Who would name their kid Chet, anyway?" Knox asked, unknowingly breaking the tension that Neil and Charlie kept creating.

Meeks raised his eyebrow and cast a glance at him. "No offense, *Knox*, but are you sure you should be egging on his parents' choice of name?"

Knox crossed his arms and slouched. "I guess not."

"Something up, Knoxious?" Charlie asked.

"His name is Knox," Pitts said, "That's what's up."

Knox sat up. "No, that's not—what? Why would I be upset about that now?"

Pitts shrugged. "I don't know. You're weird."

"I—" Knox cut himself off and rubbed the bridge of his nose in irritation. "No. Not at all. It's something else."

"Well, what is it?" Charlie pushed, "Hm?"

Knox looked up at Todd slowly, and Todd just shrugged. "S'alright. You can tell em'."

"We won't be able to do any roommate switches this year," Knox said, "Todd's parents—they, uh... well, Todd?"

"I said *you* could tell em'."

Meeks hadn't stopped looking confused this entire encounter. "What's up?"

"I'm a bit too gay to be roommates with a boy unsupervised, apparently," Todd said nonchalantly, but by the way he wasn't looking at anyone, Neil knew it was really bothering him. Todd usually never looked at anyone in particular when he was saying something to the group, but more often than not, he would at least give Neil a little glance, and Neil would always give him a reassuring smile. When Todd wasn't in search of that, Neil knew that it was because Todd thought he couldn't be reassured. "So, Jeff has to, uh—" Todd coughed and Neil could tell he was going to start crying. "He has to check on us every night. Make sure there's no funny business or whatnot."

"What?" Pitts said, "That doesn't—that's not—should you just tell your parents that Knox is messing around with Charlie?"

Knox held out his hands in a confused gesture and looked at him. "What—Why would that help? What would that do?"

"Well, maybe Toddsie's parents know that I'm too smokin' hot for you to make a move on any other boy," Charlie said and swung an arm around Knox, and Knox turned around and threw it off of him, nearly breaking Charlie's wrist in the process. Charlie quickly retracted his

touch. "Okay, *what* was that for?"

"Being arrogant."

"I thought you were into that!"

"*Please* stop," Meeks begged, "I don't want to hear it."

"S'fine really," Todd said in a way that let everyone know it was most definitely not fine. "It's not Knox they're worried about. It's me, and there's not much we can do about that, so..." He shrugged again and crossed his arms over his chest and Neil was only becoming more worried about him by the second. His fucking parents. Neil could've killed Todd's fucking parents. "It's not like it'll be hard or anything. Nothing to hide. Maybe Jeff'll give up halfway through the year or something."

"It's still not okay," Neil suddenly spoke up, and Todd was finally looking at him. "Your parents always stay out of your life until they want to be pricks and get all up in your business. That has to be some sort of privacy violation! Mr. Nolan can't allow that."

"Mr. Nolan can't allow his prodigy Jeffery Anderson to do anything he wants?" Knox asked, clearly also being upset about this arrangement, and Neil didn't blame him at all. Todd's parents had no right to do this to their own son, let alone their son's roommate. "Fat chance."

"It's fine, Neil," Todd tried, "Boarding schools have hall monitors and that crap all the time. It's not a big deal."

"It *is* a big deal!" Neil insisted, "That's—hall monitors don't go *into* rooms." He got up off of his bed and Todd was standing up right after him. "I'm gonna go talk to Jeffery."

"No, Neil, *no*," Todd said, grabbing his arm and pulling him back as he had already tried to make his way to the door. Unlucky for him, Neil was much stronger when he was angry, and he basically dragged Todd out of the room and down the hallway. Todd only managed to get him to stop right when they were at the stairs that led to the high school dorms. Somehow, he was out of breath, but Neil couldn't say anything about it considering he, himself was breathing kind of heavily. "Neil, don't."

"I hafta'!" Neil yelled, "I'm sick of your parents treating you like this, Todd!"

Todd dropped his grip on Neil's arm and looked anywhere but his face. "I know, okay! I know! But... think about it. If you walk in and try to tell Jeffery to buzz off—how's that gonna look?"

Neil took the time to actually listen to what Todd was saying, and it was because he was right. Todd had enough problems with his parents thinking that he was doing something unholy with Neil, and even if Jeffery knew that was all a lie that *he* had made up, Neil begging for him to mind his business on Todd's behalf sure wasn't going to help anything. A little truth helps a big lie after all. It'd only make his bullshit seem more convincing. Neil's adrenaline drained out of his body, but he still crossed his arms and threw himself against the wall in repressed anger. He hated not being able to do anything about this.

Todd walked over and leaned against the wall next to him, facing him while Neil stared directly ahead. "I appreciate the thought, Neil, but there's nothing we can do. It's not a big deal anyway."

"Maybe it's not," Neil said, "But someday your parents need to fucking learn that they can't do this to you, and I'll be damned if I'm not the one who teaches it to them."

"Promise to leave me a lesson?" Todd asked, and Neil was finally able to smile.

"You can be the introductory course," Neil said and finally turned over on his left shoulder to face Todd. "And then I'll take em' straight to the final exam. Straight to the SAT's of *why you're a shitty parent* class."

"Seems kind of unfair."

"Boohoo," Neil said, loving the smile that it got off of Todd's face. "Report me then, Toddsie. I'm sure the school board'll care."

"Mhm," Todd says, "And who's the school board? Charlie?"

"Charlie *and* Knox."

"Then I suppose I have no chance."

"I suppose you don't." Neil looked down at Todd for a silent moment and had a brief urge to tell him about his self-realization over the summer. The fact that he was now a bisexual chameleon as he so called it, but it kind of seemed wrong to do in the moment. It'd be a weird thing to say after what had just happened, but Neil was an expert at bad timing, so he didn't say *that*—he didn't come out to Todd

just yet—but he did ask something else. "Are we both still on the '*I'm not gay*' train?"

Todd immediately averted eye contact and turned over so he was staring straight at the wall ahead. "Yeah, yeah..."

I don't know why I asked cause' I'm sure not Neil nearly said, but he didn't. "Okay. So still nothing to worry about, huh?"

Then Todd gave him this look—*the* look, it had to be—and Neil didn't know what it was supposed to mean, but it made the moment a lot different than it just had been. They'd had plenty of conversations like this. Hundreds over the years, probably, but that look—Neil understood why Todd hated it so much. It gave you a feeling—a horribly, flustering feeling that you couldn't name and that you couldn't put an emotion to. You had no idea what that feeling meant, but you did know that it meant something important.

"Yeah, nothing to worry about."

Chapter End Notes

hi friends!!!!!!!!!!! i dont know why my own writing is making me nervous but everytime i start a chapter im like is this the one

is this going to be the one

are they gonna kith

and then it never is

so im building up what i hope is going to be a very climactic climax
anyway: as per usual i love u all and ur comments are so sweet and make my day!!

also: .. i sort of design stickers and ive been uploading them to redbubble just so i can buy them but i do have some dps stickers so...

https://www.redbubble.com/people/yeeturki/shop?asc=u

if u r interested in getting u some quote stickers from our favorite boys. there u go have a nice lil look

if i dont get off of work at the asscrack of night tonight then i will get a move on the next chapter. uwu i love u all

Eighth—Perfect

Chapter Summary

Neil wants to fall in love, but he also thinks it's terrifying.

Chapter Notes

CW// inappropriate themes, smoking

.... oh buddy this is a whopping 7000 words but u know what yall deserve it. i actually kind of like this chapter so pls let it be one you guys also like because you all are literally so sweet and i will never stop expressing how much i love you all.

also this is anderperry obviously but friendships are something i like developing as well and its always good to, i dont know, just shift the focus for a little bit even if not entirely

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil wanted to fall in love with Todd Anderson.

He was, out of everyone, the most aware of how perfect Todd was. No one else knew Todd like he did. No one experienced the multiple sides of him, saw the way he looked when he was sad, knew what made him the happiest—that was only Neil. And Todd knew all of that stuff about him, too. Todd was absolutely perfect for Neil. There would never be someone more perfect for Neil Perry than Todd Anderson. But like it was a disability or something, Neil just couldn't fall in love with him. Neil could *say* that he was in love with him. He could stare at him endlessly when he was *whoa*. He could spend every second of his life with Todd. He could fucking marry Todd, but that didn't change the fact that his heart just wasn't listening to him. Usually, him and his heart were pretty much on the same page, but this time, it kept screwing Neil over like it was his dad or something.

And Todd wasn't gay, so really there was no reason that Neil had to long so hard to be in love with him because it would've made him equally as sad as not being *able* to be in love with him. It would be even worse, probably. Neil never imagined himself in a situation where he'd be *wanting* to love someone and he couldn't, but he still thought that loving someone who didn't love you back would probably hurt more, but he *wanted* to be in that situation. He wanted to know what it felt like to love Todd Anderson, and his body wasn't

letting him. He didn't want to stare at Todd all day and have it mean nothing, but the only thing it ended up meaning was that Neil was just kind of a creep.

Everything else was there. Everything else was *perfect*. Neil wanted Todd close to him, wanted to hear Todd laugh, to be with him at his best and worse, to be able to play with his hair and bask in the soft smile it would pull from his face, to go home with Todd and defend him against his parents, to *fall in love with him*, but the actual love was the only thing that was missing. And, you know, the main part of being in love is, I don't know, *being in love*. And Neil wasn't. He had everything but that, and wow wasn't *that* just perfect?

His inappropriate dreams snuck up on him sometimes, and every morning he woke up thinking that he should go to fucking church or something because his brain was a dark, nasty place when he wasn't in control of it. Todd was always the main star of them (except that one time about Knox, Charlie, and something about Puerto Rico, but we'll just say it's not a shame Neil doesn't really remember that one), and Neil wanted to apologize to him for tainting his image, but of course he never actually did that. However, he *did* start hoping for those dreams. Maybe one day he'd wake up with new feelings. But the more he willed for them, the less they happened, and even when they did happen, he never woke up feeling any different.

How could you want to dream about sexually explicit scenarios with your best friend and still not be in love with him? Seriously? Do *you* know? Because Neil sure didn't. And it wasn't exactly a problem he could bring up with anyone because they'd all probably throw it back in his face and call him stupid. Tell him that he was *obviously* already in love with Todd, but Neil knew that wasn't true. It just wasn't because god damn it he would *know* if he was in love with Todd, and he wasn't. He just fucking wasn't, but he wanted to be. He wanted to be in love with Todd more than he'd ever wanted anything in his whole life.

So imagine his annoyance when he woke up from a dream about *Meeks.* Yeah, Meeks. Luckily, it still didn't instill any feelings in him, but he literally woke up and screamed out in frustration, snapping Charlie out of his sleep. Neil didn't care that he'd woken Charlie up because he was so sick of what his body was doing to him. His brain and heart never worked together, but this *one* time they'd decided to band together to make sure that Neil couldn't develop a crush on Todd. It was bullshit. Complete and utter bullshit. But that was kind of hard to explain when Charlie was on top of him half-

strangling him and demanding to know why Neil had dared to wake him up.

"Just fuck off," Neil mumbled and tried to shove his face into his pillow, but Charlie wasn't letting it happen, clearly being up to his ears with Neil. The both of them knew that if they were roommates the next year, one of them was going to end up dead. It was a mutual feeling—they had discussed it—but they *at least* thought they'd make it through this year, but it was starting to look like they wouldn't. With the way Charlie's nails were digging into his neck, Neil figured they might not.

"I was having such a *good dream*!" Charlie complained, "Why do you have to be so loud? If you're gonna go hating your life, can you at least climb into the wardrobe or something?"

"You don't get it, Charlie!" Neil said.

"I get it well and good!" Charlie said, "You're annoying! What else is there to get?"

"Just get off of me," Neil whined and tried to push Charlie's wrists away from him, but his grip was pretty good and Neil worried for a moment that he might actually die. "Charlie, look, I'm sorry, but get the fuck off of me."

Charlie shuffled off of Neil and back onto the floorboards, dusting himself off and straightening his clothes. He then looked back up at Neil. "Take your apology and shove it up your ass, Neil. I want to *sleep.*"

"Then go to sleep," Neil said.

"Why bother?" Charlie asked, "If you're just gonna be yelling into the emptiness of our room and waking me up?"

"You don't *get* it," Neil repeated and threw his covers off of him angrily, accidentally kicking Charlie in the process, which was not a good thing for him. He narrowly avoided Charlie's attempt to jump on him and slipped some shoes on, quickly running to the door before Charlie re-calibrated himself enough to try again. "I'll be back later." He flung himself out of their room and down the hall, not knowing where he was trying to go. Away from Charlie at the least and somewhere to yell as loud as he could at the most. He knew he wasn't going to find anywhere where he could do the latter. It was early in the morning and most of the school, except him and Charlie, were

asleep.

Somehow he ended up at Todd and Knox's room, and without even thinking about it, Neil just walked in and stared at his two friends sleeping (okay, maybe that *was* a little creepy). Knox was such a messy sleeper. All of his limbs were pointing in different directions and his mouth was open with a long river of drool pouring out of it. Despite all of that, his face still looked peaceful, but Neil knew it wouldn't be when he woke up with a thousand different cramps. Seriously, his left leg was propped up on the wall. The *wall*. How did he even do that in his sleep without breaking his toe kicking it? Neil didn't know, and he wasn't sure he wanted to.

He shook his head at his poor friend, who was in the healthy stages of his life before he got arthritis, and turned to Todd's bed. Todd slept curled up in little ball. He didn't used to, but Neil noticed it was a trait he had developed after his twelfth birthday. Not to say Neil stared at Todd while he slept a lot, but it was just something he picked up on, alright? He was creepy, not a stalker. Not yet at least. All you could see of the boy was the top of his head pressed against his pillow. Neil carefully crept over and knelt down by the side of the bed, realizing how disturbing this actually was. How would he react if Todd was in front of him early in the morning? Well, he supposed he wouldn't actually care too much, and Todd probably wouldn't either, but *objectively* he was being fucking weird.

Todd's blankets were clutched very tightly in his hands and covering his face up to his eyes, which were clenched shut. He didn't look calm anymore. He looked like he was being attacked in his mind. Neil slowly reached over to the edge of the cover and attempted to pull it down at least past Todd's nose so the boy could get air. He managed to get it only past his ear because he was holding on to the rest of the blanket too tightly. Todd's hair was straight, but the edges of it curled while he slept. Neil rested his wrist on Todd's shoulder and delicately pushed back a clump of curls. They weren't in the way of anything, but it gave Neil an excuse to stroke Todd's face, and—*wow,* he was reaching stalker-level behavior quicker with every action.

Todd's hair was soft. Uncharacteristically soft. It felt like a cotton blanket. The hair fell back to its place when Neil took his fingers back, so he fell into a stupid little cycle of continuously pushing it back. One of the times he did, he noticed a scar right at the tip of Todd's right temple. It wasn't too bad of a scar, and Neil wasn't worried about it because he knew how Todd had gotten it. When Todd was really, *really* little—like his parents still paid attention to him little—he

caught himself up in a rug on his way to the tree on Christmas morning and slammed head first into their living room coffee table. Todd hated that story—*Jeffery* was actually the one who had told Neil—but Neil thought it was adorable. Todd was very opposed to that point of view when it was brought up, however, insisting that he had just been a little idiotic child. Neil said that he *was*, indeed, an idiotic child, but he was an adorable one.

Neil looked back down at Todd's face and saw that he looked like—well, like *Todd*. His eyes had loosened up and he looked calmer and Neil couldn't hold back his smile. He glanced down at the blankets in Todd's grasp and took his hand back from Todd's side to try and lightly tug the blanket out of his clenched hands. It wasn't working too well, so he took a different approach and tried to very, very carefully pull Todd's fingers away from the blanket, hoping that if he got one the rest would just follow, and that's what happened. Todd's right hand let go of the blanket, but somehow his fingers got laced together with Neil's and *that's* what he was clutching onto now. Neil barely took notice of it, finally being able to tug the blanket down under Todd's chin.

He felt Todd's light breaths and was relieved that at least he still had his regular sleepy breathing pattern. He used his other hand to resume stroking Todd's hair. His breath evened out even more, and Neil hadn't even thought that could've been possible. He looked, again, like he had the morning of his twelfth birthday. Completely content and happy. Calm with no worries. Perfect. Neil thought that he looked perfect. His hand fell into the same rhythm of brushing back Todd's hair without really thinking about while he took Todd's hand—the one in his—and brought it up to his lips, pressing a very soft kiss on the back of it. He didn't really know how much time passed as he stared at Todd's face—it felt like a lifetime—but he didn't care either because he could've spent forever like that.

Suddenly Todd's eyes were opening and Neil was afraid that he was about to get the cops called on him for being a fucking weirdo creep who kissed people while they slept (like the prince in Snow White), but Todd barely even reacted when he noticed that Neil was in front of him. He took a second, but eventually he looked around and kind of realized what was going on. Kind of. Todd was not waking up, his eyes were just open. Two very different things. Neil knew the difference. When Todd was waking up, he was usually angry—as we all are when we first wake up—but when his eyes were just open, he was adorable. He blinked at the world like a new born baby, and it didn't help that he talked like he was just learning how to speak.

When Todd acted like that, Neil knew he was going to fall back asleep. It was very hard to get Todd to *wake up* when he was like that.

Todd rubbed his nose on his pillow to get rid of an itch. "Tha' makes sense."

"What does?" Neil whisper-asked, noticing that he sounded completely entranced, and to be fair, he was.

"Was sleepin' gud'," Todd responded, "Must be becausa' you."

Neil furrowed his eyebrows in concern. "Do you usually not?"

"Dreams," Todd responded, and it barely made sense until he continued. "Not bad, buh' not gud'."

"Mm, I get it," Neil said, "It's okay. I had a dream about Meeks, and you do *not* want to know what it was about."

Todd laughed with his face pushed into his pillow. "Tha' why yur' in my room?"

"Dunno," Neil shrugged, and he really *didn't* know. He didn't remember walking to Todd's room, he had just kind of ended up at the door. "I just wanted to see you, I guess."

Todd rubbed his face in his pillow again. "Saw me las' night."

"Yeah," Neil said, "Doesn't matter."

"Wan' in?" Todd asked and pulled back his blankets. Neil looked at the newly revealed spot of Todd's mattress and barely even thought about it before he was climbing in. Todd's eyes were already closed by the time Neil was situated, and their hands were still linked together. Todd pulled closer and nuzzled his head into Neil's shoulder, under his chin. His hair smelt like his stupid scented shampoo, but Neil took in a deep breath of the scent and pressed another kiss to the top of Todd's head. Todd mumbled something into Neil's shirt.

"Huh?" Neil asked him, and pulled back a little so he could hear Todd when he repeated it.

"Nuthin'," Todd shook his head, "I jus'... I jus' preciate' you. Thas' all."

Nothing more was said and it didn't take Todd long to fall back asleep, leaving Neil there practically by himself. He was tired, but not tired enough to go to sleep, so he resumed his regular creeper activities and

stared at Todd's face, and he felt absolutely... perfect. There was nothing better he could've been looking at than Todd asleep against his chest and there was no better feeling than Todd's slow breaths on his neck. There was nothing better than Todd because Todd Anderson was perfect.

Neil Perry was smitten with Todd Anderson.

But he just wasn't in love with him.

—

"Ginny, *please* listen to me." Neil was leaning against the phone box, twirling the cord around nervously in his fingers. He'd thought no one would understand his problem if he told them, and he was right, but nowadays it felt wrong to keep anything from Ginny. It used to feel wrong to keep anything from Todd, but he had kept tons of things from Todd in the past couple of years, so that train had kind of left the station already.

"I am listening!" Ginny insisted, and she must've been in a similar position to Neil. She went to Henley, but as far as Neil knew, Henley was much better than Hell-ton, so she was probably in a private phone box so not anyone and everyone could listen to her conversation. Neil had already seen Pitts' head peeking around the stairwell corner at least six times already. His friends liked to eavesdrop on his conversations with girls, but Neil always made them boring enough at the beginning that his friends would leave. That's what he'd done, and Pitts had actually apologized to him for trying to listen in on something so boring before he walked off to find one of their other friends. "It just sounds—I mean can you blame me? It sounds like you've already figured this out."

"No, you don't get it," Neil clutched the phone harder and spoke a little more harshly into the receiver. He took a breath and loosened his grip on both the phone and the cord. "I would *know* if I did, Gin. I would!"

"How about just go with it for now?" Ginny suggested, and Neil could tell that she definitely didn't buy a thing he was saying. Being the one who had broken through it, Ginny was very familiar with Neil's denial. To her, this probably just sounded exactly like him at the beginning of the summer. "It's not like anything is gonna happen. Just tell yourself you do, and the feelings will come later. Easy."

"No," Neil said.

"Well, why not?" Ginny complained.

"Todd doesn't deserve that."

"Todd isn't going to know!"

"I don't care if he's not going to know!" Neil shouted a little louder than he meant to. He covered the receiver for a moment and looked around him, making sure none of his other friends had decided to make an appearance. "I'm not gonna say I like him when I don't. That's worse than lying to him. I can't do that."

"Then what are we doing here, Neil?" Ginny asked, "I can't make you a love potion. I'm not a witch."

"Oh come on now. You're *for sure* a witch."

Ginny silently considered this on the other side of the phone, and then Neil heard her sigh. "Yeah, I probably am, but I'd specialize in only black magic, so you probably wouldn't want my help."

"Would black magic kill me?"

"Neil!"

"It was just a question!" Neil defended, "And... I don't know—we don't have to do *anything*. I just needed to talk about it."

"Well, are you good on that front?" Ginny asked, "Because you are aware that your unsureness pisses me off, right?"

"Well," Neil started and turned around, leaning against the wall with the phone still pressed to his ear. "We can't all be as sure of ourselves as Ginny Danbury is, can we?"

"You totally could." Neil could *hear* her eyes rolling. "Wake up in the morning and decide to be sure of yourself."

"You make it sound so easy."

"It is easy," Ginny responded.

Neil scrunched his face. "You sound like Charlie."

"You know, I'd like to meet Charlie."

"No way, Ginny," Neil said, "I don't think I'd be able to handle the two

of you at the same time."

"Okay," Ginny said, and then a couple of seconds later, "Then I'd *love* to meet Charlie."

"Oh shut it," Neil said, and then he thought for a moment. He wasn't ready to hang up the phone yet. Ginny was a lifeline on a landline, and Neil wasn't ready to cut that off yet. "How's Chet?"

Ginny snorted. "You *care*?"

"No," Neil said, and then repeated, "How is he?"

"Same old, same old, I don't know," Ginny said. She didn't really like her brother, but at the same time she did. Obviously because it was her brother, but also because at the very least he was a good one. He wasn't a total fucking prick to her... just everybody else on the face of the planet. "He's got a girlfriend now. I like her. She's nice to me."

"And you're letting her date Chet?"

"Hey, high schoolers don't like getting owned by twelve-year-olds, alright?" Ginny said, "Talking about that... my birthday is in late October. Would you be able to come down? It's just gonna be Sam and I at my house for the weekend. You could bring any of your friends, if you wanted."

"I don't know, Gin..." Neil said, but he already knew that he wanted to. A birthday party away from Welton. Neil thought those kinds of parties were the best ones. "You know my dad, and I don't know if you'd want to spend a weekend with any of my friends."

"I'd take Todd, Pitts, and Knox," Ginny said, listing them off like they were items on a grocery list. "They sound nice. *Oh*! And definitely Charlie. Honestly, if you're able to come and you *don't* bring Charlie, I'll send you right back."

"Knox..." Neil trailed off in thought, remembering something that Knox had said. Knox often mentioned a lot of things in passing that he didn't realize were rich people privileges, and, while most of Neil's friends were filthy rich and pretty well off, Knox's dad was a *lawyer*, and you couldn't really top that. Neil had remembered Knox talking about his cross-country Europe trip he'd taken two summers ago with the Danbury's. Family friends. Neil could make something out of that. He could *try* at the very least. "Your dad likes him?"

"I think my dad has a shrine of Mr. Overstreet in his closet," Ginny responded, "He is obsessed with him. Of course he likes his son." Ginny had mentioned that Mr. Danbury talked about the cases he and Knox's dad worked on a lot, so it *did* kind of sound like a borderline obsession. Ginny could recite all the details of some of the cases just because of it. She was as good a listener as Todd. "My mom's pretty alright with him too. I think he's their favorite of my friends behind you and Sam."

"Me?" Neil veered off topic. "They haven't even met me."

"Hey, it's almost like being on the honor roll at *Welton* for a lot of consecutive years gives you a good reputation around the rich folk or something."

Neil shook his head and glanced at the ground. "Shut up." When he looked back up, he saw another boy walking toward him, and he knew his time was short. Even if he did want to talk to Ginny for the rest of the night, he'd have to get off the line eventually. "We can make up some sort of plan. Use Knox to get me to your house and say it's something academic. My dad would eat it up."

"Yeah, I'll go into that idea," Ginny answered, "You gotta go?"

"Mhm," Neil nodded as if she could see him.

"Okay, would you do me a favor?"

"Depends."

"Talk to Todd," She said, "About... well, maybe not about *that*, but about, you know... your chameleon thing? I think he oughta' know—and not just cause you're trying to go all Romeo and Juliet on him—because he's your friend, and everyone else knows. If you can't 'fake' like him, then you can't lie to him either."

"It's not a lie," Neil argued.

"Omission is still considered a lie."

"I bet you're passing English class."

"With flying colors, thank you." He could hear the shit-eating grin in her tone. "Alright, bye Neil. Same time next week?"

Neil said yes and then hung up the phone, stepping away quickly to

let the other boy use it. There were about six phones for students to use around Welton and Neil took up a lot of time on all of them. It made him seem more popular than he was, and he had a weird likeable reputation where practically anything he did made everyone like him more. He didn't hate it, but he didn't quite love it. Eventually he shuffled all the way back to his room, hoping to God he could have a quiet Saturday night and not walk in to Knox and Charlie doing... whatever. Which sounded wrong, and Neil didn't mean it like that. Neil meant it like everyday he feared he was going to walk in on them sacrificing one of their friends. This time it wasn't that, but it wasn't anything better. Charlie and Knox appeared to be in the middle of a serious conversation.

Neil stood awkwardly in the doorway with his hand on the knob. Eye contact was made and silent words were shared, but somehow in the end it was Knox who ended up leaving. He shoved past Neil and Neil patted him on the back as he did. He looked upset—the both of them did. Neil closed the door softly behind him and then traveled over to Charlie's desk, pulling out some cigarettes and a lighter, and then sitting down next to Charlie. He held the items out and Charlie appreciatively took them, lighting one up and then tossing everything else behind him on the bed.

Nothing was said for a while. Neil let Charlie smoke in silence, taking the cigarette from him when he occasionally passed it over, and Neil was kind of glad he'd grabbed the things. It seemed they both needed a smoke. Neil looked over at his bed and saw a book laying on his pillowcase—something he decided he could deal with later. With all this Todd stuff, Neil nearly felt like he was dating Mira again. His attention to his friends had again dwindled to a level he did not like it being at, so right now was Charlie Dalton time. Mysterious pillowcase books could be a later thing.

Eventually, Charlie put the cigarette out on the floor and waved the smoke out of the air. "Knox and I are done."

"Done?" Neil asked. He didn't know what that necessarily meant. Done could mean that they were done with a secret project. You never knew with Charlie and Knox. "How do you mean?"

"You know," Charlie scooted back and leaned against the wall. "Done. With the—with the stuff."

"Oh." *The stuff*—messing around as everyone loved to call it. Neil knew it wasn't really 'messing around.' Knox and Charlie actually

cared a lot about each other, but it wasn't clear to anyone what it *really* was. Not dating and not messing around. Somewhere in between, but apparently now it was nothing. "What happened?"

"He, uh—" Charlie coughed into his hand and Neil couldn't tell if it was a genuine cough or an attempt to cover up a teary tone. Either way, Charlie took a few moments to start talking again. "He wanted to... put a label on it. Or something like that, I don't know. I don't think it matters, Neil." He tried to brush it off and shove Neil off his bed, but Neil wasn't having it.

He grabbed Charlie's arm, and with a threatening stare, threw it back at him. Charlie didn't dare touch him again because the way they cared about each other was scary. It was kind of like they were each getting blackmailed by the mob, but they were getting blackmailed into taking care of one another. That's how seriously they took their friendship. Neil hardened his stare. "It matters. You like him."

"I do," Charlie agreed, "I have for a while... we know this, but it's nothin' serious."

"Nothing serious?" Neil asked, "It's not—what did he say? What does he want?"

"Labels, man, I told you," Charlie said quietly.

Neil realized what he meant and leant against the wall next to him. "He wanted to be your boyfriend?"

"Yeah," Charlie said, even quieter. "He... yeah. And I don't—It's not like I don't get why he wants that. Obviously we've already been acting like that but... I don't know, Neil. It's scary."

"Scary?" Neil asked, "How could it be scary?"

"It just is," Charlie answered, "It's terrifying. It's—To me, it's a whole bunch of chances that I'm gonna let him down. It's a level of commitment I can't do right now. And he understood that, but—"

"But he didn't want to do it anymore?" Neil finished for him, "Geez. I'm sorry, Charlie."

"I said it's nothing." Charlie turned his head so Neil couldn't see his face. Charlie Dalton hardly ever cried, but he had the worst broken puppy-dog look of all of them. There were so many emotions in his face all of the time. Looking at him when he was upset was basically

like staring Medusa in the eyes. You'd be frozen in stone with confusion because Charlie Dalton was the most complex person Neil had ever met. "I understood his thing, and he understood mine. It came to a—" He took a shuddering breath. "It was a rather healthy conclusion for two horny teenage boys."

Neil nodded his head and didn't say anything. He wasn't sure what to say because suddenly *he* was scared. Since the beginning of the year, he'd been willing himself to fall in love with Todd, and he'd already accepted that love being unrequited, but nothing is impossible. He'd never considered if it went the other way. If, miraculously, Todd liked him back, what would Neil do then? That was scary. Neil was scared of letting Todd down *now*. He couldn't imagine how bad it would be if he let Todd down while Todd *loved* him. Could he even do that? Now he was terrified. Todd couldn't love him. He couldn't. Neil wouldn't let him. Not if there was the slightest chance that Neil could fuck that up.

"Hey," Charlie snapped in his face, "Did I get in your head?"

"Kind of," Neil answered, "But you don't gotta' worry about it, alright? Not your problem if my mind decides to spiral."

"Okay, and?" Charlie said, "Not your problem if I get dumped-but-not-really-dumped, yet here we are. You wanna talk about it?"

"What if I did love Todd?" Neil asked, "And then what if he loved me? One in a million, I know—" Charlie widened his eyes in an unbelievable way that thankfully Neil didn't see. "But if it happened—you're right: that's scary. I can't let him down. I can barely do that now, let alone if he liked me... let alone if he *loved* me. Todd can't love me, Charlie. You're right. God, you're *so* right."

"Hey... Neil." Charlie sat up and held Neil's head in his hands, making sure that he was focusing on his face and nothing else. Their faces being this close was a different kind of intimacy. It wasn't even a brotherly type thing. It was... Charlie was his twin flame. That's what it was. Two-halves of an ancient medallion. Pretty cool when they were apart, but unlocking something priceless when joined together. Their foreheads were touching and all their problems were shared between them in their breaths. "Calm down, would you? You're thirteen. You're acting like you've got an arranged marriage set up with Todd tomorrow. That is way too deep for you to be thinking about right now."

"*You* thought about it," Neil said.

Charlie sighed. "Yeah, but I was *in* the situation. I hate to say it, but you're not. By your standards, you don't even like Todd like that. Knox was right here in front of me presenting me with the opportunity. Todd doesn't even know you like guys. You're really gonna let your brain jump to these conclusions?" Thank God Charlie Dalton was a good liar because he, too, was suddenly terrified about Neil and Todd. He knew things that made what Neil was saying ten times more troubling, so he was doing what he could. Thankfully, it seemed to be enough.

Neil nodded against his head. "Yeah, you're right. Why are you always right?"

"I'm really, *really* smart."

Neil laughed and pulled away from him, falling back into his previous position against the wall with a new mixed sense of calm and panic. Only Neil Perry could feel so calm and so panicked at the same time. "Just make me a deal that now that you don't have Knox, you're not gonna start jacking it every night again?"

"Oh I nearly forgot about that!" Charlie said, and Neil suddenly wished he'd never brought it up. Charlie didn't take it any further than that comment, however, and Neil was grateful. "I won't, I won't, but you're part to blame, man. If you decide to stay awake and I don't know, what am I supposed to do?"

"Go to the bathroom?" Neil suggested, "Shut up?"

"I didn't ask for fantasies, Neil."

"Don't say fantasies," Neil begged, "Not when we're talking about this." He set his hands on Charlie's bed, but then took them back very quickly and jumped off. "I don't wanna be on your bed anymore."

"Oh, calm down," Charlie said, "My bed's clean. It was *your* bed Knox and I did things on." Charlie was immediately tackled and punched, but he was only laughing. "I'm kidding! I'm kidding!"

"You'd *better* be," Neil said, "Or, I kid you not, I will do unthinkable things on *your* bed. At home."

"At home?" Charlie asked, "That's kind of extreme."

"It'd be what you deserved."

"Maybe so." Charlie pushed Neil off of him and smoothed down his coat. Charlie had started wearing ties too, but he never tightened them all the way. It annoyed the hell out of Neil. That kid was never going to wear a tie right. Never in his life. Probably not even at his own wedding. "I know this is probably bad timing but, are you gonna tell Todd? About... you know? Your thing?"

"You know, you bash on Ginny, but you and her are really similar," Neil said, "She said the same thing. I was talking to her earlier."

"Never compare me to a Danbury again."

"She said she'd love to meet you," Neil responded, "Her birthday is in October. She wants us to go down for the weekend."

Charlie crossed his arms like a defiant toddler and was silent for a minute. "... Okay."

"And I was gonna ask you if you could talk to Knox about it..." Neil started, scratching the back of his head, "But I can now, I guess."

"No, I can," Charlie denied, "He's still going to be my friend. He's not getting away from me that easily."

"I appreciate the energy."

"You know it, baby."

"Do not call me that." Neil took a breath to calm himself and then flopped down in Charlie's desk chair. He wanted to reach over the bed frame and light up another cigarette, but he and Charlie were limiting themselves. One or two a week, and most of the time they shared it. He did grab the items, but only to shove them back in Charlie's desk drawer amongst all the other random trinkets he kept in there. "And, I don't know. About the Todd thing. Ginny says I should."

"Well, clearly you should listen to Ginny," Charlie said, adjusting himself so he was laying on his bed the right way and propping himself up against his pillow. His hands were behind his head in the *I'm a total douche* posture and he was staring right at Neil. Neil only shook his head at his movements and words. "What's that look for? I think she's a smart girl."

"Has anyone ever told you that you have the backbone of a snake?"

Charlie whipped a toothpick out of nowhere and started chewing on

it. The bad thing about their shared smoking habit was that now they both felt uncomfortable when something wasn't in their mouths, which Charlie had already made plenty of jokes about so don't say anything because Neil doesn't want to hear it. Charlie had stowed away toothpicks anywhere he could grab them, but Neil had opted for chewing at the ends of pencils and pens. Toothpicks pricked at his gums and he was very sensitive about his teeth. Another reason he was trying to limit his smoking. He licked over his teeth after thinking about them, and then looked back up to his roommate.

Charlie moved the toothpick side to side in his mouth. "I have a lot of shared characteristics with snakes."

"And who told you that?"

"Curiously enough, Jeffery Anderson," Charlie answered, "And Cameron a coupla' times, but everything he calls me goes in the book." He pointed dramatically at his desk and Neil rolled his eyes. He was being serious. *The book* was a leather-covered journal filled will every single bad thing Cameron had ever said to Charlie. All of it was in Todd's handwriting, because he was the one who remembered them word for word, but Charlie signed off on every one. The two of them had been filling it up since the middle of fifth grade. Good thing Todd's hand-writing was relatively small and Cameron used a lot of the same insults.

"And why was Jeffery Anderson calling you a snake?"

"I fucked with Cameron."

"Of course you did."

Cameron was on the debate team now, and Neil could've punched him when he found out. He'd left him in the dust when he actually needed him, but the second Neil was no longer actually in debate, Cameron jumped at the chance to join. Neil had an itching suspicion that Cameron had a need to try to show up everyone all the time, but he didn't really care. Cameron could be good at debate. He could try his hardest or whatever. Neil never tried at all, so it was no skin off his back.

Then the conversation shifted back to Ginny and her birthday party. Neil explained the beginnings of his forming plan to Charlie and Charlie nodded along to it, agreeing that it was definitely possible that Knox's connections could get them there. The problem was getting Knox to cooperate because Knox hated Chet Danbury. Even the

slightest chance he'd see him for a second and he would back out. Neil was kind of counting on Charlie to convince him if it was necessary, but that back-up bridge had sort of burned, so he might've had to go to Todd for help. Todd knew Knox second-best. He lived with him after all.

Charlie went off to go talk to Knox, and Neil didn't really understand why he wanted to do it right *then* but he wasn't about to try to tell *Charlie* what to do. He just shook his head and let him take off, hoping that he would come back relatively emotionally stable. He finally remembered the book on the top of his pillow and walked over to see what it was. Well, it was a book, but it had a note on top of it. A note from Todd, which was weird. Todd and Neil didn't usually leave each other notes—they kind of just waited to tell the other person something in-person—but Neil thought the tiny post-it note on the cover of the book was adorable. He could tell Todd was nervous while he'd been writing it. He was still very familiar with Todd's handwriting and his knowledge of it had only deepened. He'd signed off on it—as if Neil wouldn't be able to tell who wrote it—and left a little heart in the bottom right corner. It took Neil a long time to actually read it because he was too busy admiring it.

Brought these from home. Stole them from Jeff's room. You get to pick which one to read because you're gonna be reading it this time. Not me. I've been reading the books since Dracula. Your turn for dry throats and voice cracks.

-Todd

Neil ripped off the sticky note and saw that what he previously thought was one book was actually three, and he understood why Todd had left it as a note now. Decisions stressed Todd out in general, but other people's decisions stressed him out the most. It seemed that Neil's decisions were the worst. Todd hated it when Neil was picking between two things he liked in front of him. Todd had once presented two records to Neil and asked him which one he should've given Meeks and Pitts for their birthdays, respectively, but the second Neil tried to pick one, Todd backed out of the question. It just made him nervous to watch the thought process of a decision. Neil didn't understand it, but if it helped Todd not be anxious, then whatever. He pushed those thoughts aside and picked up his three literature options.

Breakfast at Tiffany's, The Catcher in the Rye, and I Am Legend.

Neil made his choice and tucked it under his pillow, grabbing Todd's note and the other two books. He stuck the note to the side of his desk and made his way out of his room and to Todd and Knox's. He hoped that Charlie and Knox were discussing their shit somewhere else and that Todd was in there. Neil hadn't seen Todd since that morning—*early* that morning. Like when he had woken up and climbed into his bed, early. Todd was gone when he woke up, and Neil only saw flashes of him at meals throughout the day. He was hoping to catch him at least before lights out. He was worried that his early morning escapade had freaked Todd out.

The room was empty when Neil walked in. He was disappointed, but decided that was better than dealing with Charlie and Knox. He set the other two books on Todd's bed, looking around for a pen so he could write a note of his own. He found a pencil and a piece of scratch paper and scribbled down some words. After he threw his note on top of the books, he set the pencil beside them and headed toward the door, taking one last glance behind him at Todd's bed. Todd had seemed welcoming that morning. Surely discomfort wasn't why he had been absent all day.

Neil wanted to worry about it, but he made himself not. He forced himself to calm down. He still wanted to fall in love with Todd—that was the only way his life needed to go at the moment—but he also needed to not fall into the self-harming spiral of thinking about letting Todd down and disappointing him. He couldn't even daydream about loving Todd because it always led down a dark route, so instead he just tried to do some homework and get his mind off of it. Off of perfect Todd Anderson, and his perfect face, and his perfect laugh, and his perfect smile, and his perfect *everything* because Todd was still so, so perfect.

But Neil wasn't, and that was the problem.

Chapter End Notes

HI HI HI i keep forgetting to mention but this fanfic has broken 100,000 words and that is longer than the first harry potter book and that is fucking insane.

thats wfnbefnarf idk how i did that

but its also fucking insane how each of you has read those 100,000 words and still liked it so once again i love and appreciate you all and your comments hit me right in the heart. i

continue to hope that these chapters wont start disappointing you
<33

Eighth—Touch-Starved

Chapter Summary

> The boys make the first day of Ginny's birthday weekend kind of difficult for her to deal with.

Chapter Notes

> CW// this chapter is very, very inherently sexual and goes into much more detail than i ever have before. obviously not very bc they are 13 but i said and thought some wack shit when i was 13 so to be specific
>
> touch-starvation, intrusive inappropriate thoughts, explicit mentions of masturbation, implied masochism, minor exhibitionist comments used as a threat (you'll see)
>
> and i think thats it and i know that looks like a lot but you know boys will be boys. ew no i fucking hate that i said that. hormonal teenagers will be hormonal teenagers. there is tiny bits of bonding and fluff in there too so its not balanced but haha
>
> if u dont want to read ill put a little thing of what happened at the end so ur not lost (not that the book has a plot to miss!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil was really fond of Autumn. It was his favorite season. He was quite the fan of sweaters, and Fall was really the only season that was perfectly suitable for wearing them. And in his opinion, the combination of red, orange, and yellow was the most pleasing color palette. Vermont was enough of a snowy state that there were a few ski resorts around, and, while Neil *hated* Winter sports, he loved riding the ski lift to the top of the mountain at the point in Autumn where the leaves were just turning. It was beautiful. His mom used to take him every year, but there had been little time lately, so he hadn't gone in a while.

That was the image he was trying to have stay on the forefront of his mind on the way to Ginny's birthday party. Getting there had been easier than Neil had expected. Apparently Ginny *and* Knox both had enough of a good reputation that Neil barely had to provide any information about the party at all before his father allowed him to go. Ginny was an astute student at Henley and the only daughter of the

Danbury's (and a girl, obviously, and Mr. Perry was still trying to force *the straight* onto Neil) and Knox was on the honor roll at Welton and the son of a lawyer. No two better people to use as an excuse with a strict father.

Of course, there were certain details he left out. Like the fact that it was an overnight weekend party. He'd be spending two nights at the Danbury's. His father had probably anticipated three hours at most. And he also had no idea that Charlie and Todd were also coming. Not that Neil was *deliberately* hiding that fact from him. His father just didn't ask, so he didn't tell. He did talk about Sam, because his dad liked Sam, so it was like the opposite of digging himself into a hole. Slowly building a staircase? Whatever the opposite was—that's what Neil had done.

Usually Hager would drop them off at an event like this, but there were four of them, so he passed on the job to Knox's driver. That's where Neil was at the moment, trying to picture falling leaves and colorful trees as he was pressed against his best friends in the back seat. Normally, that was fine—Neil touched his friends all the time, but over the last month... he'd barely shook anyone's hand let alone been a breath away from another person's face. Todd didn't hug him or do anything anymore, and Neil hardly was that affectionate with anyone else, and they hadn't playfought at all because Charlie had been caught with a Meeks-induced black eye, and expulsion was on the table if any of the boys got caught fighting again.

Well, that's what Neil told Charlie to keep him off of him anyway. In reality, Nolan would call his parents at most, but that was worse. Charlie would hardly take that as seriously as Neil would need him to, so he kind of lied. Charlie attacked everyone but Neil, and encouraged everyone to leave Neil alone, so it worked out. It worked out in the sense that Neil's dad wouldn't know what he'd been up to, but it didn't work in the fact that he hadn't been touched in so long that whenever someone even so much as laid a hand on his shoulder he practically melted.

His friends were about the same. Most of the group left Todd alone when it came to fighting unless Neil had initiated some sort of violence, but since he hadn't for a while, no one touched Todd. Charlie and Knox thrived off of each other's touch, and ever since *their* thing ended, they'd both been stripped of that thing, and at that point it had become a necessary lifeline. The two of them were *fine* and getting along just swell, but they'd never sit next to each other. They'd developed some habits and hadn't broken out of them yet, so bad

things would happen if they would've sat next to each other in that cramped back seat.

So Charlie and Knox were on the outsides and Todd and Neil—who didn't necessarily want to be touching one another either—were in the middle. Basically they were the horny blockade.

And okay, *look*, Neil had standards. He had preferences. But he was also thirteen and hadn't been hugged in two months. His mind was wandering. He couldn't focus when he could feel the pace of Todd's breaths on his shoulder or the warmth of Charlie's thigh against his. So trees and leaves were what he was trying to focus on because he wasn't about to let these thoughts make a *physical* appearance. It wasn't working. At all. Todd's breath was stuttering. Why the *fuck* was it stuttering and why did it sound so... hot? Of course Neil couldn't fall in love with the kid but in a moment's notice could think of a million different scenarios where—well, you get it. Neil's mind hated him and Todd was so fucking—*whoa*.

It didn't help that Charlie had wandering hands. So, while Neil knew he didn't mean it, what else was he supposed to be focused on when he could feel Charlie's fingers at the hem of his jeans and in other places they definitely shouldn't have been? It made Neil try and scoot away from Charlie, but that only pushed him closer to Todd, which got the attention of Knox, who saw that Charlie was touching Neil and got jealous and started squirming uncomfortably, shoving Todd into Neil, too.

Neil didn't know what to do. He didn't know what he *wanted* to do, but it didn't involve anything appropriate that was for sure. His mouth was right against Todd's ear as Charlie adjusted himself so that *he* was comfortable, which meant that everyone else wasn't. Somehow, he thought that maybe talking would help soothe the tension of the situation. "Uh... hey."

Nothing was soothed when Neil felt Todd shiver. "Hi."

"You have any space over there?" Neil asked.

"Not an inch."

"Would you mind sitting on Knox?" Neil hated that he was asking that because he didn't want Todd to sit on Knox. He wanted space (and he wanted Todd to sit on *him* if anyone) but he was unnecessarily possessive and Todd couldn't sit on Knox because Knox didn't deserve that. But he couldn't sit on Neil either because that would make a few

things much more difficult for him to hide and Neil was kind of concerned he wouldn't be able to control himself either. "I just—uh—Charlie's finger is basically up my ass and I have nowhere to go." It wasn't the worst excuse.

"We're almost there," Todd responded, and Neil could've swore Todd dared to press them closer together. Neil was a puddle. He hadn't been touched in so long, let alone by Todd. Neil could've fucking kissed him right then, but he heard Knox's driver cough, and it snapped him out of that hormonal haze, and even though he was in the middle, he somehow ended up falling out onto Ginny's rich-person driveway first.

Ginny skipped down the path as soon as she saw the car, screeching to a halt when the piled-up boys all fell out onto the pavement. She gave each of them a very long, judging stare, and then introduced herself to Charlie and Todd. After another very long period of judgement, she smiled and merrily walked back up her drive way, expecting the boys to just follow her, which they did. Neil was happy she hadn't dared to touch him, but he wasn't so lucky when Sam saw him as soon as he entered.

He went absolutely stiff as Sam engulfed him in a hug, but he realized he didn't want Sam to think that he was disgusted by him or something, so he hugged him back and it nearly killed him. Sam had liked him over the summer, but the hug had sparked something else in Neil's mind. Something about how everything ever was suddenly attractive to him. The way Charlie was pulling his shirt down and adjusting it. Knox running a hand through his hair. And—*Was Todd biting his fucking lip?*

"I have to go to the bathroom," Neil announced very suddenly and walked to where he knew the bathroom was. He swung the door shut and slid down to the floor by his back. Putting his head in his hands, he wondered if it was even legal to be this sexually frustrated as a thirteen-almost-fourteen-year-old. His voice was still cracking and he had barely hit puberty. There was no reason he needed to be popping a boner just cause his friend was touching him a little bit. But why would anything go well in his life, right? That's why he was on Ginny's bathroom floor after all.

"Neil?" There was a light knock and Neil recognized the girl's voice. "Are you alright in there? Can I come in?"

The last thing Neil wanted to do was start thinking about *her* inappropriately, but once he convinced himself that he was actually

too scared of her for that to be possible, he let her in. She took his seat against the bathroom door and he sat on the ledge of the bathtub. He tried to cross his legs in an attempt to hide what Ginny so-clearly already knew. She had an older brother after all, and he probably invited boys over all the time. Granted, those boys were probably usually never attracted to one another, but it was familiar enough for her to figure it out.

"Have you and your friends been locked in separate closets for the past month or something?" Ginny asked, and suddenly Neil was confused.

"Them?" He asked, "No, it's just me."

"Ha!" Ginny obnoxiously exclaimed, "As *if*. You are *all* pitching tents in my foyer and I really don't appreciate it."

Neil couldn't hold himself back. "Are you serious?" His mind wasn't going anywhere better knowing that his friends were feeling the same way. That *Todd* was feeling the same way.

"God, be less eager, won't you?" She asked.

"I'm sorry, Gin," He replied, but he wasn't sure if he actually meant it. All the older boys were right. You could never think straight when you were horny.

"There's a shed out back. Used to be Chet's clubhouse." Ginny tossed a thumb over her shoulder lazily. "You guys can have an orgy in there, if you want."

"Wha—Ginny!"

"What? I don't want you masturbating in my house!"

"*Ginny*!"

"Show me where I'm wrong, Neil." She crossed her arms.

"You're not but I—just *stop* it, alright?" He brushed down his pants. "I'm fine. It's fine. I'm not—this is weird. Let's just go, okay?"

"Fine," She answered, and Neil was about to stand up and start for the door, but Ginny was too quick. She rushed forward and pushed Neil back into the tub by his chest. He hit his head on the edge and was about to yell at her until he saw her reaching for the faucet. His scolding turned into pleading as she blasted him with cold water from

the shower head. She kept Neil down like she was waterboarding him and then shut the water off. "There. Better?"

"Ginny! Why would you do that?”

"No horny boys in my house. You can each have a turn."

"Ginny!"

"You can all share one turn if you want."

"Alright, bring Charlie in here."

"Really?"

"No!" Neil shouted and climbed out of the bathtub, reaching for a towel behind him, which Ginny swiped before he could actually grab it. "You psychopath!"

There was a small knock on the door, and Sam's timid voice said, "Uh, Gin? Neil? You almost done in there?"

"Yeah, Sammy!" Ginny shouted back, "Just a second."

"Is everything alright?"

"It is now!"

Neil shook out his hair like he was a wet dog and soaked Ginny with as much water as he could. He also wrung out his sleeves onto her, but she defended herself by whacking him with the towel and using it to dry herself off. Neil angrily breathed out and looked down at his lap. His physical problem had surely... shrunk... but... "How am I supposed to explain this?"

"Tell them the truth?" Ginny suggested.

"Oh, yeah? The truth, huh?" He wiped some water off of his face and whipped it on the floor. "You want me to go out there and tell them that I'm so attracted to them all right now that I'd gladly drop to my knees for any of them?”

"No," Ginny said, and then a couple of seconds later, "Not in my foyer, but the clubhouse—"

"Shut *up*." He successfully snatched the towel from Ginny and started drying out his hair, following her when she decided that it was time to

exit the bathroom. Sam was waiting outside the door and his concerned expression didn't fade away at all when his two friends exited the bathroom. He stared, frightened, at Ginny as she strode past and then set his eyes on Neil, silently asking for an explanation, but Neil didn't have one. "Just... don't ask."

Sam didn't, but Charlie sure did. Neil tried not to look for the *pitched tents* Ginny had mentioned, but his eyes kept dropping down, but each time he willed himself to look back up. Charlie walked up to him and used his first two fingers to pinch some of Neil's shirt on his shoulder. He lifted it up and then let it smack back down to his skin with a gross, wet sound. "You know you're supposed to take *off* your clothes when you shower, right?"

Charlie's stupid hand was still on Neil's stupid shoulder and it was so warm and tempting that Neil shoved Charlie away from him a lot harsher than he needed to. "Shut up."

Ginny waved a hand dismissively. "Don't mind him. That's all he's been saying."

"Consider him not minded," Charlie responded, but his eyes dragged along the wet clothes sticking to Neil and Neil slid backwards to stand behind Sam because he could not handle Charlie looking at him like that, and he sure couldn't handle when he saw Knox and Todd looking at him the same way. There was no way they found him as attractive as he found them right then. No way. Todd didn't even like boys. But *god* Knox and Charlie did, and—Good lord, getting punished by his father for fighting at school would've been way better than this. Neil wrapped the towel around his shoulders and tugged it shut, hoping that if he looked uncomfortable enough his friends would stop looking at him because if they kept staring at him—

"So!" Ginny clapped and looked around her house, "Sam and I can take your guys' stuff and put it in the guest room, and Knox can give you guys a tour. That sound good?" She turned. "Knox?"

Knox was out of it for a moment, but he snapped back into it. "Huh? Oh, yeah. I can do that."

"Chet and my parent's room are off-limits," She pointed at him and Knox nodded. "Alright!" Her and Sam each took two of the boys' bags and headed toward the stairs. "See you in a minute!"

Once her figure had faded away, Charlie refused to leave Neil alone. "So what happened in that bathroom?"

"A freak accident," Neil said, "Fell in the bathtub, turned on the shower, it was a situation."

"What? Were you and Ginny playing tonsil tennis in there?"

"No! Absolutely not," Neil responded, but then he realized he would have to come up with an excuse to why Ginny had followed him in because he knew Charlie was going to ask. He considered if the truth actually *would've* just been easier at that point. It's not like his friends could judge him. Knox's tight-fitting jeans weren't doing *him* any favors, Charlie practically looked like a wreck, and Todd couldn't stop tapping his foot. He wasn't about to have a gay orgy with his friends in the remnants of an asshole's club house, but he was thinking about it and soon being shoved into a shower wasn't even worth it anymore. "It's nothing. Can we not talk about it? Just take the tour?"

"No. I for sure wanna talk about it," Charlie argued.

"Charlie..." Knox warned, and Neil was surprised he even had the self-control to do so.

"What? I can't be the only one noticing the sexually charged energy here." He pointed in a square between him and all his friends and Neil could only think about how he hated Charlie Dalton and his unearned confidence. Charlie looked up to Knox, and the lusty haze Neil had in his own eyes was so apparent in Charlie's that Neil could barely be mad at him for what he said next. "Neil's gotten off to me before, you and I were making out a month and a half ago, and Todd—" He turned to Todd and for some reason paused.

Todd broke the silence. "Neil has *what*?"

Suddenly Neil was mad, and he hissed, "Charlie!"

"Come on, Neil. It's hot!" Charlie said, "That's besides the point. I'm just saying that clearly we are all—"

"Touch-starved," Knox cut him off, "We're all touch-starved and not thinking straight. Especially you, Dalton."

"Come on, Knoxy," Charlie said, and with the way Knox barely reacted to the whiny tone Neil had the thought that it was definitely a complaint that Knox had heard before. "We're all—it's not like we've all suddenly become gay. Remember what I said about experience the other year? This is just *experience*!"

"What is *this*?" Knox accentuated, and Neil barely felt like he was a part of the conversation anymore. "Neil got off to you once. *Once,* Charlie. *You* kissed Todd. We're not gonna all throw away our dignity and jack each other off or something."

"Maybe I just wanted a long hug."

"Did you?"

"No," Charlie said, "But maybe. And you're sure acting all high and mighty when *your* stiffy is the most obvious."

Knox's hands covered his lap. "Shut up, Charlie."

"Once again," Todd spoke up, "Neil did *what?"*

"Nothing," Neil quipped, "Neil did nothing."

"Oh, let me tell you, Toddsie," Charlie said, and something in Neil's body just made him give up and not try to stop him. "Last night of sixth grade, I'm beating it, alright?" That was the moment that Knox *completely* gave up, sitting on the bottom step and pinching the bridge of his nose with a very disappointed sigh. Neil wanted to join him, but if he sat down it would give Charlie too much time to run once Neil snapped back into it and went in for the kill. "You know, I thought I heard rustlin', assumed it was nothing, though. Then I come to find out that the rustling was Neil *listening* to me."

"It didn't—" Neil cut himself off, "I was tired."

"What?" Todd shrieked and looked at Neil, "He's not lying?"

"Why would I lie about that?" Charlie asked.

Neil couldn't describe the kind of mad that Todd was. "Really? Charlie? *Charlie*? Oh, my god."

"Once!" Neil yelled, "And I was *tired.*"

Todd was about to say something, but Charlie started laughing. He was playing Devil's advocate, but he was hardly even an advocate. He was just kind of the Devil. Todd whipped around. "What's so funny?"

"How high and mighty *you're* being too," Charlie continued laughing, "Toddsie, Toddsie, Toddsie..."

Todd's face paled. "Charlie..."

"No," Neil said and put his finger up to Todd to stop any other words that were gonna come out of his mouth. "Let's hear *this*."

"Todd got hard when I kissed him."

Neil felt the jealousy in the pit of his stomach nearly burst out of his throat like he was a fire-breathing dragon. "*What*?"

"Fuck off," Todd said, and it wasn't clear if he was saying it to Charlie or Neil. Knox's fingernails dug into his pants and Neil could feel the jealousy radiating off of him too. "I wasn't—I didn't—"

"What?" Charlie taunted with a snort, "You were 'tired'?"

"Charlie, I swear to God," Neil said.

"Oh, shut *up*, Perry. You know you wanna do it again."

"Not to you, asshole."

"Oh, right. To Todd, huh?"

Neil stopped. His blood hadn't even gone cold. It had just left his body. He was about to lose it, but he took a breath. He knew how to get the best of Charlie. Once he felt the warmness return to his face, he let the raging jealous fire out of his stomach. "Yeah. To Todd. To Todd over you any day." Charlie was going to talk, but Neil kept going. "You weren't the one I was thinking about at the end of it. Wouldn't of been able to finish if you were. I was thinking about Todd the whole time." The room went deadly silent, and Neil felt powerful even though half of that was a lie. He was thinking about *Charlie* the entire time, but at the very end, the thought of Todd had slipped into his mind. He just pushed it to the back of his brain until this very moment to flaunt it in front of Charlie's face. Neil turned to Todd—ready to give him an apologetic expression for saying these things about him—but Todd looked too wrecked for Neil to go through with that.

"I bet," Charlie deadpanned.

Neil slowly walked toward Charlie. "Yeah. I bet Knox would too."

Knox's attempt at intervening was cut off by Charlie tackling Neil to the ground, and out of everything Neil didn't want to admit, saying that it felt good when they hit the ground was at the top of the list. Charlie was practically pulling his hair out and Neil was biting the

inside of his elbow and there was a lot of pain going on and yet Neil did not feel like he was in a *fight*. He poked Charlie in the eye and rolled away, but Charlie caught his wrist and resumed their... fight.

"How bout' we just make out right now, Neil?" Charlie asked, "How about that?"

Neil pushed Charlie's cheek away with the palm of his hand. "How would that help, genius?"

"Well, I have a few better suggestions."

"Stick them up your ass."

"Now that you say it—" Neil covered his mouth, but Charlie licked his palm, so he quickly took back his hand and wiped it on the wetness of clothes. Wet spots covered some of Charlie's clothes, but he hardly noticed. "Come on, Neilly, right in front of Todd? I think you'd like that."

"Did you get that line when I said it to your mom last night?" Neil asked, and he literally hated how much of a cover-up his response was. Charlie was pushing some buttons, for sure. Neil had a few scenarios in his mind and he needed Ginny to shove him in a cold swimming pool at this point. He needed to drown or get baptized to get out of this dark crevice he'd suddenly found himself in.

"Nope," Charlie popped the 'p.' “Switch the names up a bit and it was *Todd* I said that to. Really helped, too.”

Neil stopped. "Liar."

"You wish."

"You're *lying*," Neil spat with gritted teeth.

Charlie used the leverage he had gained from Neil pausing in rage to pin his wrists down, then leaned down so their faces were an inch apart. "How would you know?

"I gather that you guys haven't gone on a tour." All four boys' heads turned toward the staircase where Ginny was standing half-way to the top with a hand on the railing. She didn't look too surprised, and Neil had to assume that she'd been listening for quite a while, especially when she knew the level of tension she had left behind. She'd probably given Sam something to play with and then snuck off as not

to scar him, but still stay in the loop herself. She put her hands on her hips and tilted her head so her and Neil could make proper eye contact. "Get up."

Neil shoved Charlie off of him and jumped up, nearly slipping on the puddles he had created from being tackled. Charlie got up right next to him and they acted entirely natural. As if they hadn't been flirting/fighting/sexualizing one another seconds before. Charlie brushed off his shoulders and Neil adjusted the collar of his shirt. He had nail marks near the collar from where Charlie was probably trying to strangle him, and he didn't want to think about them, cause he had nearly told Charlie to dig a bit deeper when he'd been doing it.

Ginny sighed. "Okay, come on. The guest room's ready. We're gonna watch some tapes."

Charlie and Knox hopped up the stairs, but Neil turned his head over his shoulder to look at Todd, who hadn't said a word in the longest time. "Todd?"

Todd waited a moment, then responded. "Did you mean it?"

Neil looked back, saw that Charlie, Knox, and Ginny were definitely out of earshot, and completely turned around to face Todd. "Did I mean what?"

"Anything," Todd answered, "Anything that you said."

"Oh," Neil said, "I—some of it, yeah."

Todd pursed his lips and clenched his eyes shut in thought for a second. "Do you like boys?"

"Uh," Neil breathed. Fucking Charlie. He just *had* to ruin everything. "Yeah."

"Do you like..." Todd took the deepest breath Neil had ever heard him take. "Do you like me?"

No, but I want to, Neil thought, and he was really about to say it, but fucking Charlie wasn't done being a douchebag yet.

"Coming up or what?" He yelled.

"We're coming!" Neil shouted, and then he looked at Todd, said nothing, and ran up the stairs without waiting for him.

—

A couple of hours later, after plenty of regular movies, everything was back to normal. Knox and Charlie hardly remembered anything that had been said, Todd had been quiet, and Neil had just been reveling in his multiple thoughts that weren't about his friends. The cure to sexual frustration was pumpkin spice cookies baked by Ginny and Sam hours before the other boys arrived. Everything was solving itself slowly until they all took a bite of those because as soon as they did the energy in the room multiplied and Neil was happy. It no longer felt like they were in an alternate universe. After their last movie, they sat on the floor of Ginny's living room slowly eating the last of the cookies, trying to savor the cure.

Ginny and Charlie got along fantastically, just as Neil suspected, and they were locked together in a conversation with Knox about the Acid Bath Murderer from England. Neil was glad not to be a part of the conversation, but he wasn't glad to be watching Todd and Sam hit it off as much as his other friends, for that he *hadn't* expected. Sam and Todd were a lot alike in many ways. They were both anxious and liked to fade into the background. They both had talented, respected older siblings, but Sam was infatuated with his sister. In a normal, healthy way. He just admired her so much, and he could hardly say a sentence without mentioning something about her. Neil thought that Todd might've been sad hearing about such a good sibling relationship when his was shit, but there wasn't a trace of that in his face. He was laying on his stomach with his chin propped up in his hand, listening intently to Sam talk about his Broadway plan with Avery.

Todd always listened to people when they talked, but Neil did not like the look in his eyes. It was—That was Neil's look. The look that Todd gave *Neil* and only Neil. The same look he got when he was talking to Todd and he was actually enthusiastic about something. The fond smile when he did something stupid. It was on Todd's face right then, but it wasn't for Neil. It was for Sam. Even if Neil *hadn't* been desperately looking for reasons to fall in love with Todd Anderson, that broke his heart. Some of his happiness relied on the special expressions and smiles that Todd saved for him. *Him.* And Neil thought it was going to be like that forever, but one conversation with Sam Lee and he was losing it. Todd wasn't looking at him like that anymore. Todd hadn't looked at him like that in forever.

It wasn't love, but it was the same empty feeling Neil had the previous year when Todd had stopped playing with his hair. When Todd stopped hugging him. When Todd stopped touching him. Ginny and

Sam had given him enough attention that afternoon that Neil was fine at the moment. He was leaning against Charlie's back while he talked about sulfuric acid with Knox and Ginny, staring at Sam and Todd, and he wasn't melting. He was fully solidified and not a fucking puddle. He was also dry—Ginny had lent him some of Chet's old clothes. His clothes from his early Welton days, thankfully, so Neil didn't feel like a douche wearing them. Neil had said that he could just wear some of the clothes that he had brought, but Ginny said to consider wearing Chet's clothes as a punishment for the stunt he'd pulled with Charlie in the foyer. Neil thought that was fair enough.

But anyway, he wasn't what Knox said anymore. Touch-starved. He remembered what it felt like to have someone touch him but he was... he was Todd-starved, he supposed. He didn't remember what it felt like to have Todd right next to him in a way that wasn't *forced*. Not being pushed against him in the backseat of a rich person's car, but having Todd leaning on his shoulder while he was reading. Todd choosing to be that close. It hadn't happened in so long. Neil missed it. He could admit that now. He fucking missed it, and there was nothing he could do about it. He should've told Todd that he liked him. He figured lying to Todd would've been better than watching him smile at Sam. Sure, Todd wouldn't have liked him back, but he would've been nice enough to start giving Neil attention again.

God, what was he? A toddler? Todd was his friend not his dad, not that his dad gave him much positive attention anyway. He was his own person, and he could do whatever he wanted, smile at whoever he wanted, and it wasn't supposed to affect Neil this much. It was nearly like he was in love with him, but he still wasn't, so what was the fucking point of feeling so abandoned?

He felt a poke at the bottom of his shoe. It was Sam. At least *he* was still looking at Neil like he was the only person in the world. "Neil?"

Neil shook himself out of his depressed stupor and sat up off of Charlie's back. "Yeah?"

"Nothing," Sam said, "You just look kind of out of it. Do you want a water or something?"

"Oo! There's lemonade in the outside fridge!" Ginny suddenly spoke up, "Cookies and lemonade, anyone? We'll be like my mom's old lady book club."

"Oh, yes!" Charlie said and clapped his hands. "Absolutely. What's our

first book?"

"Why, *Strangers on a Train,* Charlotte," Ginny said, "What else?"

"I like the way you think, Virginia."

"Thank you," Ginny said and then she hopped up, "I'll go get the lemonade."

"No, I'll get it," Neil said and Ginny instantly gave him a look. He stood up. "You guys are all talking or whatever. I can go get it."

"It's a whole pitcher," Ginny said, "And you'll need to grab some cups, too."

"I can do it."

"Well, maybe, but..." Ginny looked deep into Neil's soul and then around the room. "Todd can help you. You two go get the lemonade. We'll set up the coffee table so we can set them on there and not spill anything on my carpet."

"And by 'we' you mean 'us' right?" Sam asked her.

"*I* don't spill lemonade."

"For that last time, that wasn't me. It was Harley," Sam said.

"Whatever you say." Ginny held her hands up and then looked at Todd who was still on the floor. She clapped. "Well, up, up! Not gonna carry itself, now is it?"

"Calm down," Neil said and then held out his hand to Todd. "Come on. I know where it is."

Todd grabbed his hand and pulled himself up, and Neil nearly sighed in relief. He had brief worries that Todd would reject his hand, but at least Todd never rejected Neil when he wanted to be close to him. Well... most of the time, but Neil couldn't blame him for... what had happened last year. Neil didn't let go when Todd was stood up, instead using their conjoined hands to lead him to Ginny's garage that wasn't really a garage. It was just like another big room where Chet liked to throw his parties. There was a pool table and all that crap, even a whole little mini-kitchen. Neil waltzed over to the fridge and dug around for the pitcher of lemonade, which had been pushed all the way to the back.

Todd hopped up on the counter and sat on it with his legs dangling. "Do they keep someone hostage in here?"

"Probably waiting to lure in Mr. Overstreet," Neil said, and took in the sound of Todd laughing. He shoved some bottles of ketchup and mustard into Todd's hands. "Don't worry. Not for the lemonade."

"Oh, no, really?" Todd asked and set the condiments on his counter, "I really enjoy mustard lemonade."

Neil smiled and looked at him over the open fridge door. "We'll sneak down and make some later."

"Yum," Todd said, "Maybe we can try something new. Add some mayonnaise?"

"You're gonna make my mouth water."

Todd laughed again and continued to set the bottles Neil was handing him onto the counter. Neil could've easily grabbed the lemonade at that point, but he was grabbing anything else he could to keep him and Todd alone in there for as long as he could. He missed hanging out with Todd alone, too. Charlie had joined in on a lot of their hangouts since most of his time used to be spent with Knox, and guess what, so had Knox because most of *his* time used to be spent with Charlie. So basically any time that Neil and Todd used to have to be alone was now group time. They even invited Meeks, Pitts, and Cameron to just finish off the group and spend some time together.

"Hey, where's the lemonade? In Russia?" Todd asked and jumped off the counter to look around the fridge door. Neil quickly grabbed it and set it on the other side of the counter before Todd could see how empty the fridge was.

"Right here. Ginny really shoved it back there. You look for cups. I'll put all this crap back." Thankfully, Todd agreed to that and Neil shoved everything back into the fridge as quick as he could. Todd had found paper cups and was grabbing as many as he needed to, because Todd liked grabbing exact numbers of things instead of a whole pack. It was kind of cute.

He counted on his fingers. "Do you wanna share a cup?"

"Hm?" Neil asked and looked over.

"If I drink too much citrus, I might get sick," Todd said, "But I like

lemonade. If we shared a cup you could keep me from drinking too much."

"Sure, then," Neil said and opened a nearby drawer, pulling out a pack of straws and wiggling it around. "This really is gonna be like book club."

"You'd suck at book club."

"Hey, no, not as long as you were there."

Todd pulled back from the cabinet with five cups stacked in one hand. Neil grabbed the pitcher and held the straws under his arm. For a moment, Todd rolled his bottom lip in between his teeth, looking like he was debating saying something, but in the end he said nothing and the two of them headed back toward their friends. They set everything down on the coffee table that Ginny had so diligently prepared and they all got back to their conversations, but this time it was one big conversation with everyone, and Neil would be ashamed to admit that he'd made sure that Sam couldn't sit next to Todd.

"My mom promised to do this gardening thing around the neighborhood tomorrow morning and she totally aired the fact that she wouldn't be here," Ginny said, sipping on her lemonade, "So we have to wake up early and do it for her. It's part of the terms I agreed to to get you guys here."

"What's early?" Charlie asked.

"Uh... seven?"

"You're evil," Charlie said and pointed at her. "That's *evil*."

"We'll just go to bed early, cry baby," Knox said and then turned to Ginny. "Are we all sleeping in the guest room?"

"Yeah, there's two beds," Ginny said, "Sam and I already call one, you guys can decide who gets the other bed. Whoever doesn't gets sleeping bags."

The four boys looked at each other and silently made the decision that Knox and Charlie couldn't be in the bed together. Then, out loud, it was decided that none of the roommates wanted to sleep together either because sleeping in the same room all the time was enough, so that left Neil and Todd. That also left Neil staring at the dark ceiling when everyone was well past asleep. He couldn't fall asleep because

he didn't trust himself. What would he do in his sleep? What if he dreamt about Todd and how much he missed him? What if his stupid, inappropriate thoughts came back and he... yeah, what if that happened? The chances of it kept him awake.

Until Todd viciously turned around and faced him, whispering, "Go to sleep."

There was no shortening of his words and there was anger in his tone. He was awake. His eyes weren't just open. Neil shook his head. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

"Is it cause of what happened today?"

"Kind of," Neil said, and he supposed it sort of was. He was more easily set off because of it, if nothing else.

"You know, I don't mind..." Todd said, and it was somehow even quieter than his initial whisper.

Neil scooted closer. "Don't mind what?"

"You know, if you—if you thought that I'd be creeped out because you... because of that stuff you said, I'm not," Todd continued, "I don't really care."

"Are you—Are you sure?" Neil asked, "And I—half of that wasn't true, I promise. I was just trying to get under Charlie's skin."

"And he was trying to get under yours," Todd responded and pulled the blanket further up his body to sort of hide in it. Neil couldn't see him. It was too dark, but he could feel him moving and hear the blankets shifting. "That stuff that *he* said. It wasn't true either. I thought I'd tell you. It kind of seemed like it was bothering you."

"It was," Neil confirmed, "Cause Charlie doesn't get to say that kind of stuff to you."

"'Doesn't get to'?" Todd echoed in a questioning tone.

"Well, yeah, I mean..." Neil trailed off. What *did* he mean? "Never mind. I don't think you want to know what part of mine was true."

"Yeah, I do."

"The first bit," Neil said and was suddenly glad that he couldn't see Todd. "The, um, the finishing bit. It was sort of true. I didn't—oh, god I hate this."

"Is' okay," Todd said and yawned, "I don't care, remember? I learned a lot of disturbing stuff today. This is the least of it."

"When I was done, I *was* thinking about you," Neil said, "And I did sort of... finish because of that thought, but that was it. I swear."

Todd didn't say anything for what felt like an eternity. "I'm glad."

"...What?"

"You don't get to finish to the thought of Charlie."

"...What?" Neil repeated with twice as much confusion.

"Never mind," Todd said, and Neil could hear the stupid little smirk in his voice. "Will you go to bed now?"

"Yeah," Neil said, and he went back to staring at the ceiling because, no, it was worse now. He heard Todd move and assumed that he went back to bed, but then the mattress dipped and it became clear that Todd was actually moving toward him. Neil met him in the middle, and when he felt Todd's arm against his shoulder he said, "Yes?"

"Mere'," Todd said and scooted himself upward so he was higher than Neil for once. He wrapped one arm around Neil's shoulder and put the other in his hair. Then he rested his nose on the top of Neil's head, like he was sniffing it, and started stroking his hair. Neil hoped this was just Todd's sleep-induced cuddly personality—which he appreciated, but never considered as Todd actually touching him, but when Todd kept talking and his words weren't slurred, that hope was turned to dust. "This is what you wanted, right?"

Neil wanted to pull away and say no and stop being so pathetic and desperate for someone he didn't even have a crush on, but he couldn't. He nuzzled into Todd's chest and nodded his head. "How did you know?"

"I know you," Todd said simply, "I always know you."

Neil let himself curl his arms up into Todd's chest, so most of his body

was completely pushed against Todd. Todd's fingers stayed scratching and Neil took in his friend's scent. Oh yeah, he would be asleep soon. "Thank you."

"You know me too, right?"

"Yeah," Neil nodded again, "Always."

"And you know... oh my god I hate that I'm saying this," Todd mumbled into Neil's hair and then pulled back a little, "And you know that you mean more to me than anyone—any*thing* else, right?"

"No," Neil admitted.

"Well, I hope it gets through your head one day, Neil."

"I know that you know it won't."

"Yeah," Todd agreed, "That's what makes me sad."

Neil chose to ignore that sentiment and instead focus on the rhythm of Todd's rising and falling chest. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

"You mean more to me than anything else, too."

"I don't believe you."

Chapter End Notes

this is a warm up gang. i promise that the actual explicit stuff will be much, much more detailed and much, much worse and i swear it on my life bc i basically black out when i write smut and come back to read what some other part of me has written. but that shit isn't gonna happen till like tenth grade at least

for anyone who skipped: boys kind of fight at ginny's birthday party, neil gets jealous of todd's attention toward sam and the fact that todd has pulled away from him, and then they fall asleep cuddling in the same bed

Eighth—The Ladybug

Chapter Summary

The second day of Ginny's birthday weekend.

Chapter Notes

this chapter should be titled 'author completely disregards things that didn't exist in the 50s and continues to reference them like they existed in the 50s'

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ginny Danbury had a very elaborate backyard. Her back porch was one of those wraparound kinds, and there were two different staircases down from it into the backyard. Oh sorry, *three* staircases, actually. There were three bits that made up the lower part of the backyard. On the left was a garden with a stone patch leading away from it. In the middle was a tiny, grassy field with a tree tall enough to have a tree house. To the right was, not only Chet's rundown clubhouse that Neil reused to walk near, but a little swing set/ playground type thing.

So, yeah, basically it was the best backyard ever, and they spent a good portion of the weekend back there, incorporating it into their activities somehow. After getting Mrs. Danbury's weird gardening obligations over with, they gathered in Ginny's living room to decide what to do with the rest of their time. Ginny nearly acted like there was nothing interesting to do at her house, and both Neil and Sam had to remind her that both her parents had a 401k and she lived in a house with a foyer in Vermont and there were plenty of things to do. Ginny wasn't ungrateful, she was just forgetful.

"Whoa, wait," Charlie said, "You're telling me that there are *swings* back there and I've been wasting my time in here with you losers? I'm going."

Knox rolled his eyes and shook his head, grabbing Charlie's ankle and slamming him back on the living room carpet. "Not so fast, Indiana Jones. This is supposed to be a group thing."

"Well, you can sit on my lap and we can swing together if you're gonna make such a big deal about it."

Knox let go of Charlie immediately and simply stared at him for a couple of moments while the entire group took in that comment. Neil was already sighing in disappointment, Ginny was smiling an entertained smile, and Sam looked absolutely horrified—he was like Todd before Todd got to know Charlie, and Todd, by the way, was barely paying attention to anything Charlie did. He was having trouble in the group-setting still, so Neil kept him close, always reminding him that he was there with rhythmic taps on Todd's thigh—something he had stopped doing long ago, but Neil was slowly trying to get those habits back into circulation.

Neil was really focused on keeping an actual song's beat with his finger tapping that he barely noticed the group coming to a decision about a game they could all play together. It was cops and robbers apparently, and suddenly Neil and Todd were a team and so were Charlie and Ginny. Knox and Sam were the cops, and they were hiding a stuffed bear from Ginny's room named Nelson somewhere in the house while the robbers convened on the grass outside.

"The bear's name is Nelson?" Charlie asked and Ginny picked up some grass and threw it at him. He caught some in his mouth and spat it right back at her. "How do you like dem' apples?"

"I hope there was a ladybug on one of those blades of grass."

"Hey, now," Charlie said, "Not the ladybugs."

"We are *totally* gonna win," Todd leaned into Neil's ear and whispered, setting his chin on Neil's shoulder and laughing as Ginny and Charlie continued to bicker. "They're too dysfunctional."

Neil turned his head so he could continue talking quietly and so that Ginny couldn't read his lips. She was very good at reading lips, fun fact. If the government ever needed her to read the lips of someone on a super secret tape or something, she'd do a great job and probably be elected as the new president. "And I think I know where Knox is gonna hide it."

"Oh I definitely know where Knox is gonna hide it."

Soon enough, Sam and Knox returned to the backyard with twist ties in their hands. They approached their friends and without any warning, started tying their hands behind their backs. Ginny broke free immediately and grabbed Sam's wrists, holding him like she was going to tie *his* wrists together, then narrowed her eyes. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Part of the game," Sam swallowed nervously, and Neil didn't blame him. Ginny was terrifying. "You guys have to break out. It's a new rule. Knox made it up."

Ginny raised an eyebrow at her rich family friend. "Did he now?"

"I thought it would be fun!" Knox insisted, but when Ginny didn't let up he rolled his eyes. "Okay, just these three then, and you *can't* help Charlie out. Neil and Todd can still help each other, though."

"How is that fair!?" Charlie shouted.

"It is literally the definition of fair," Knox responded, "Now, if you'll excuse us, we have a witness in the protection program to protect." He stamped away with Sam behind him, and Neil could imagine they were going to put on war paint and take their job as law enforcers a bit too seriously. Neil wouldn't be surprised if he ended up getting shot with a revolver, or at the very least, a pellet gun. Knox was anti-cheating after all, so he did everything way past the regular expectations of eighth and seventh graders playing an outdoor game.

Todd started scooting away from Charlie, who was already trying to break apart his twist ties like he was the Hulk, and Neil started following him. He watched Todd's fingers work fast on the little square that was used to tighten the ties and was oddly impressed at how efficient Todd was at breaking himself out of a situation like that. He tried to stretch his fingers and do the same thing, but it for sure wasn't working. Todd talked casually, and Neil wondered what he would be like in an actual prison cell. However that was, Neil hoped if he ever got arrested it would be with him.

"What do you suppose Nelson the bear is in witness protection for?" Todd asked, successfully loosening the twist tie on his right wrist. Neil knew that once Todd got himself out that he could just undo Neil's too, but he suddenly wanted to impress Todd as much as he was impressing him. A look over his shoulder at Charlie told Neil that he definitely didn't need to rush, but a big head-start was never bad. He scooted himself forward until he was at the very edge of the grass where the hose pipe was. He put his back to it and slipped it up between the twist ties, beginning to tug so they would eventually break apart.

"I don't know," He answered casually and he continued to pull his arms forward. "You could ask Charlie about witnesses in serial killer cases and get a few possibilities to think about, probably."

"I don't wanna get him too excited," Todd said and suddenly his hands were pushing him up off the grass and Neil realized he needed to hurry up. Ginny was tapping her foot relentlessly and that was as good a motivation as any for Charlie to start picking up the pace. Neil didn't know what the prize was gonna be if they won, but he knew at the very least the he would be beating Charlie *and* Ginny, and that was good enough for him. Todd leaned down to help him, but Neil obtained a random surge of strength and completely tore his ties in half, bringing his wrists in front of him and shaking out his hands to get the blood circulating in them again. He was about to toss the plastic over his shoulder, but Todd grabbed it. "No, we can use them."

Neil hopped up and wiped the seat of his pants that were uncomfortably damp from the wet grass. He was okay with sitting in grass—he could stomach the itchiness—but there had to be nobody in the world who enjoyed sitting down in wet grass. He knew that for sure. He grabbed Todd's hand and gave Charlie a triumphant, cocky look, and ran to the ladder that led up to the tree house. "We can't go in the back door."

"Do you think I'm stupid? Of course I know that," Todd said.

"I was just making sure we were on the same page," Neil held his hands up as a surrender toTodd's unpredicted hostility. Neil had discovered that Todd *did* like games, he just didn't play them often because he took them way too seriously. Todd had been challenged to a monopoly game near the end of the previous year and by the end of it he had somehow instilled the thought in his opponent's head that his parents didn't love each other. Todd was ruthless and competitive and *that* was why he didn't play games often. He would kill a man to win a game of Uno. Neil admired it. "Now come on, up the ladder."

Game Todd faded away for a second and Neil saw the regular Todd's worried expression as he cast a glance at the rope ladder. "Really?"

"Yeah, look." Neil nudged him around and pointed, "Only halfway up, then we go across the shed roof, and into the guest room window. You can go first if that makes you feel better. I'll help you up, catch you if you fall—all that good stuff."

"Okay, shut up," Todd spat out and got up the ladder. Neil was right behind him, giving him an extra boost so his short legs could actually bridge the gap between the trunk of the tree and the roof of the shed. Neil did a daring jump and nearly slid back down to the grass, but Todd caught him. He smirked at Neil and Neil wondered if maybe he

should've just done the game on his own if he wanted to avoid cocky people (besides himself, obviously). "Looks like I'm the one who caught you."

"There's one more jump, Superman," Neil shoved him away, "And *I'm* going first."

"Whatever you want, Lois Lane."

Neil stopped and turned around. "*What*? I would not be Lois Lane. You would be Lois Lane."

"I would *not*."

"Both of you are Lois Lane!" Ginny shouted, and when they both looked down they saw they the opposing team was on their feet. Todd and Neil snapped back into it and Neil got the window open from the outside and dive-rolled inside. He helped Todd in and shut it, not bothering to lock it because obviously Ginny would know how to unlock her own house's window.

"Okay, we have like a thirty second head start," Neil said, out of breath. "That's good."

"Take a breath, Lois," Todd said and stepped forward with the zip tie, wrapping it securely around the window in a way that would make it impossible to open. "They're gonna have to find another way in."

Neil couldn't help but mimic his teammate's devious smirk. "Let's check this room, then."

"You know it's not in here," Todd said, "You *know* where it is."

"Yeah, but why are we in such a hurry?"

"Because I want to *win*." Todd firmly grabbed Neil's wrist, which still kind of hurt, and dragged him to the door. They peeked out of slightly cracked door and checked the hallway, making sure that Knox and Sam weren't on patrol anywhere nearby. Neil was about to say something about the coast being clear, but Todd pressed his first finger to his lips and kept him from making a sound, flinging them back around the wall just as Officer Overstreet walked right in front of the door and down the hall. Somehow, the fact that Knox had been right there made Neil start breathing heavily again. He set his forehead on the back of Todd's neck and sighed. "Aren't you so glad to have me?"

"Yeah," Neil pulled his head back up and opened the door. "Let's go get that fucking bear."

Todd smiled at him and they crept out into the hall, keeping low so they couldn't be seen through the balcony railing from down in the foyer. Slowly, they tiptoed to Chet's room because they both knew Knox too well. Knox would use Chet's room and try to reverse psychology all of them with the sentiment that he didn't want to step foot in there. An all-too predictable strategy for his best friends to dismantle. They made it in there and quietly shut the door behind them, starting the hunt, but god Chet's room was gross. If they didn't find anything in there, it would've just been like they escaped 'prison' and went to *prison* for no reason instead of finding the winning object.

"Bastard," Todd mumbled and Neil looked over his shoulder, seeing him holding a note in his hand. "It's not in here."

Neil read the note. A note from Sam saying that he knew better than to let Knox pick the final hiding spot. He set his chin on Todd's shoulder and gave a cocky little hum. "Maybe we should've checked the other room?"

Todd was about to tell Neil to shut up, but suddenly he dropped the note back where he had found it, grabbed Neil, and shoved them both into Chet's closet, leaving it cracked a little so they would still be able to breath amongst all the Axe body spray covering Chet's wardrobe. Through the crack, Neil saw Sam with a bandana tied around his head inspecting the room. He barely noticed that he was breathing heavily *again* until Todd was covering his mouth *again*. Sam started creeping toward the closet and they both fell into panic. Todd, however, went every-man-for-himself mode and used his advantage of being small to catapult himself to the top shelf of the closet and lay flat. Neil wasn't so lucky, only being able to cower under a pile of foul smelling clothing. Light leaked in slowly as Sam opened the door and scanned the inside. He kicked the backpack right next to Neil's foot and then deemed the closet clear, closing the door again. Neil waited for the sound of Chet's bedroom door to close before he popped his head out of the pile.

"Fun time up there, Spider-man?" He asked Todd, who hung his head over the side, being nearly eye level with Neil when he stood up.

"Oh, so you wanna be Mary-Jane now?"

"I get to date someone who can teleport to the top of a closet?" Neil

asked rhetorically, "Well, of course."

"You wouldn't do well dating Spider-man," Todd said, "You don't like sticky things."

"Sticky things?"

"Yeah? Like spider webs?"

"Well, would you be using them on *me*?" Neil asked, "Not until the final issue of our comic series when I complete my villain arc and you save me from a... brainwashing crystal... or something... I hope."

"By telling you random facts about yourself so you can..." Todd took a deep dramatic breath and looked as far into the distance as he could while still in a closet. "*Remember who you truly are?*" He held his fist to his chest and faked wiping a tear away from his eye.

"You're gonna fall, stupid," Neil said, "Get down from there. We have work to do."

Todd got down as effortlessly as he had gotten up, and Neil wished it was a little bit lighter so he could see how the hell he was doing that. They shivered as they exited the closet, both smelling like a used football uniform had sex with some body spray. Neil wiped himself off and they stood in the middle of Chet's room to plan their next move. Todd thought. "Well, you know Sam better than I do. Where would he put it?"

"I don't know. I haven't had a real conversation with him since the summer," Neil responded, "You were the one talking to him yesterday. You tell me."

Todd hesitated at Neil's words and looked back at him. "Are you—... never mind. I think I know. Secret compartment under the stairs."

"How do *you* know about the secret compartment under the stairs?"

"Well, I was talking to Sam last night, of course," Todd said like it was obvious and then pressed his ear against the door to check for sounds. "Now let's go, Mary-Jane."

"Just MJ, please," Neil said like he was being hounded by the paparazzi, leaning by the light switch while Todd still listened intently for the sound of someone walking past. "What were you gonna say?"

"Hm?" Todd said.

"You said 'are you' and then started talking about secret stair compartments."

"I was gonna ask if you were mad at me," Todd said, "But I really think we can talk about it later. We've a long way to sneak past and we have no idea where Ginny and Charlie are."

"God damn it I know my rights!" They heard a shout from below, followed by some grunts that signified Knox was being kicked, which was a specific grunt to be able to identify, but to be fair it was a sound Neil heard a lot. "You release me right now! You can't do this to me without a lawyer!"

Todd sighed and shook his head. "Okay, scratch that. We have an idea where Ginny and Charlie are."

"Distracting the coppers," Neil said, and without Todd's approval, swung the door open and slid down the stair banister, seeing the last of Knox and Sam dragging Ginny and Charlie back out to the back garden. Todd rushed down the stairs like a normal person, nearly strangling Neil for his recklessness, but the anger went away when Neil pulled open the compartment and whipped out Nelson the bear. He held it by the neck and shook it around in Todd's face. "Come on now, Peter Parker. Never doubt the women."

"You're a beautiful genius," Todd responded, "Now let's *go*. They're coming back."

"Go where?!" Neil hissed, lowering his volume, "We have to get out back and we zip tied the only upstairs window we can jump out of without dying! Anywhere else leads to a dead end."

"The wall outside isn't that tall."

"Toddsie, if we jump over the Danbury's wall someone's gonna call the real cops on us."

"Then we'll hide from them too! Come on!" Todd obnoxiously slammed the stair compartment door shut and pulled Neil toward the front door, quietly sliding out. Neil peeked back through the window to see that the slam had lured Knox and Sam over to investigate, but Todd tugged him away before he could see the panic of Nelson the bear being gone set into their faces. They ran around the side of the Danbury's house and to the rich-person brick wall that kept them from

their victory. It wasn't that tall. Maybe six or seven feet, but they were thirteen and relatively short. Todd shrugged. "I could sacrifice you. Step on you like a stool and leave you behind."

"You are not a ride or die kind of person, are you?"

Todd looked at him. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"I think I'm about to find out."

"Well, what's *your* plan genius?" Todd asked.

"That." Neil pointed to the side of the house where one of the Danbury children's bikes was leaning. He didn't know who it belonged to and he didn't really care if he ended up breaking it. They could buy another one if they really needed to. He got the bike off the house and propped it up against the brick wall. Then he stepped on the seat and threw his leg over the top of the wall. Right before he completely dropped off on the other side, he looked down at Todd. "Coming, Anderson?"

"Oh, Neil Perry, I take you for granted." Todd soon joined him and they decided to take a leisurely, egotistical stroll back to the middle of the lawn. Once they arrived, they made the mutual decision to let the others muck around for a bit and still think that there was a chance either of their teams could win. Charlie and Ginny had already escaped again, but they could hear some screaming about the Constitution coming from a nearby open window—the one Ginny and Charlie must've eventually used to break in.

Neil knocked the tips of his shoes together in boredom while Todd idly fidgeted with Nelson the bear. He looked over at his friend and for a moment admired how pretty he was when he was just out of it, not focusing on anything. Then he snapped back into it and shook his head, reminding himself that he had a question to ask. "Why would I be mad at you?"

"Huh?" Todd's head snapped up. He dropped the bear's arms. "Oh. I dunno. I just figured—you seemed upset last night when I was talking to Sam."

"How did I seem upset?"

"Um? Maybe by leaning against Charlie and staring off at the wall like you didn't want to be there at all?

"Well, that's not how I felt," Neil said and crossed his arms. "What would I care, anyway? You can do whatever you want. I'm not the boss of you."

"I know that!" Todd objected, "Still, being the boss of myself, I usually try to make decisions that don't upset you."

"You didn't," Neil said, "I'm fine."

Todd shook his head with a stupid little smile and picked some grass. "Such a hypocrite you are, Neil."

"What do you mean?"

"You violently assure me how much you care about me two seconds after I find out you have a girlfriend..." He said, "But when I basically pay you no attention, you don't even let me imply that you could possibly be upset? Hypocrisy at it's finest, MJ."

"I'm not—I wasn't—I don't *need* your attention," Neil responded.

"Bullshit," Todd said simply and blew the blades of grass off the palm of his hand and into Neil's face. "I invented that move."

"What *move*?" Neil asked.

"The 'I'm not a baby and I don't need you' move. You don't remember? When you called me a prick?" Neil thought that Todd looked a bit too entertained for what was happening. "You're doing it too. But it's okay, you can admit that you..." Todd swallowed and looked like he regretted everything for a moment, but he went on. "You can admit that you like my attention, Neil."

"I'm not gonna say I don't," Neil said with an angry tone that didn't really fit his response. "But I'm not gonna indulge in whatever little picture you're painting."

Todd rolled his eyes and grabbed Neil's hand for no specific reason—just to fiddle with his fingers like he used to do, and oh my gosh *like he used to do.* Neil was ecstatic. "My painting is a sentimental piece about the unhealthy attachment between two best friends." Neil's mouth dropped open slightly at those words and Todd kind of laughed at him, but he still looked like he wanted words to stop coming out of his mouth. "What? It's a Van Gogh type vibe."

"You prefer Da Vinci."

"Not anymore," Todd said, and then quietly, "Things change."

"I'm sorry," Neil suddenly said, "I *do* need your attention. I'll put your painting in the Louvre."

"I appreciate it," Todd responded, "And you have it. My attention, I mean. You always have it."

"Okay," Neil said, and then smiled a little wider and repeated, "Okay."

"Why so smiley?" Todd asked.

Neil didn't know. It was nice to hear his best friend saying that he focused most of his attention on *him*, but usually that wasn't a thing he needed his friends to say to him. He didn't viciously harass Charlie and get him to rant about how much he cared about him because he just knew. He just knew that he always had Charlie or Knox or Meeks or Pitts to count on, and he knew he had Todd too, but he loved hearing it. He loved hearing Todd say stuff like that, but he didn't know why. He still didn't like Todd. Surely, you'd only want to hear that kind of stuff from the person you have a crush on, and he still *didn't* have a crush on Todd. It must've been some sort of weird ego thing, but then again, maybe Todd was just returning the favor of when Neil had asserted his care for Todd at the beginning of the previous year.

"Cause I—" Neil cut himself off, but then continued, "I'm glad you're my person. That's all." Todd blushed profusely, but of course Neil didn't notice because he was painfully oblivious. All Neil noticed was that his friend seemed uncomfortable out of nowhere, so he took Todd's hand—the one already attached to his—and brought it up to his lips to kiss the back of it. "You okay?" Neil barely thought about it before he did it. He just did it. He barely knew that he had done it until Todd turned around and it dawned upon him that he had.

"I'm fine," Todd stuttered out, "What do you think we're gonna win?"

"A timeout if I know Ginny."

"I'm hoping you don't know her."

"You don't wanna spend anymore alone time with me?"

"I like *choosing* to be alone with you more than I like being forced to."

"Mkay," Neil said, "You're a good strategist. You should work for the

CIA or something."

"Why would *I* want to work for the CIA?"

"So you could tell me all the dirty secrets," Neil raised his eyebrows, "And we could stage a coup?"

"I'll put it in the idea book, stupid," Todd said.

Their semi-tender moment was ruined by Charlie's shout of, "Knox, do not test me! I will fuck your dad!"

"Not if I do it first!" Ginny chimed in.

"God," Todd sighed, "I never thought some of my most normal moments would be with you."

"You hold me on such a high pillar, Toddsie," Neil said sarcastically.

"Well, of course I do," Todd said, "What's a Peter Parker without his Mary-Jane?"

"A person with less of a chance to have his loved ones used against him."

"Okay, well that *usually* isn't a problem in my life," Todd said and stood up, pulling Neil up with him. "But I'll let you know if that changes."

"If Todd Anderson can finally prefer Van Gogh over Da Vinci..." Neil started, "Anything is possible."

Ginny groaned loudly and both of them turned to see her stamping her foot in the grass, upset. "You're kidding! Screw you guys. How was I supposed to win with Charlie on my team?"

"Fucking Knox's dad?" Neil asked, and Ginny charged forward and tackled him into the wet grass. He did not enjoy the feeling of the splash on the back of his sweater, so he thrashed against Ginny and tried to get the upper hand. Neil could take down any of his friends in a second, but not a newly thirteen-year-old girl apparently. She was unnaturally strong, and he had to imagine it was because her older brother was a dickhead. "Ginny! Stop!"

Ginny did, indeed, stop, but she was still sitting on top of Neil with a murderous look in her eyes. They kept staring at one another for a long while, Neil not daring to move in case he started getting punched

again, until Ginny gave up her attack and got off of him. "You deserved that."

Neil stood up too and tried to wipe off the grass stuck to his pants. "Did I?" Todd came up behind him and started picking some grass out of his hair while Neil continued talking to Ginny. "What do we win?"

Ginny huffed and rolled her eyes, walking away to join her competitive teammate so they could plan Neil and Todd's demise, probably. Neil turned around to try and see how wet his back was while Todd laughed at him. He stopped his spinning to glare at his friend, but when he did, Todd just continued laughing at him. He furrowed his eyebrows. "What?"

"Hold still," Todd said and reached forward, pressing the side of his finger against Neil's nose and then pulling back. Neil felt a crawling on his skin and when he looked down at Todd's finger, he saw a ladybug peacefully sitting on it. Todd smiled at the cute little bug and Neil squinted at it to get a better look. Universally, ladybugs were the only insects everyone agreed were fine to touch. He used to go out to the Welton fields with Meeks and Pitts to get all the ladybugs out of the grass before soccer practice. Eventually, they stopped finding them there, so they figured the ladybugs got the message of avoiding places where they could get stepped on. Todd moved his finger closer to Neil's eyes. "You had a little friend."

"Hi, little friend," Neil said softly, staring at the ladybug while it crawled up and down Todd's finger. Then he looked beyond it to Todd's face. "You know they mean good luck, right?" He cupped his hands and nodded for Todd to slip the ladybug into them. Todd did so and then followed Neil as he walked over to the garden. It was fall, so there wasn't much growing, but Neil thought the ladybug would still appreciate the seldom greenery. He preferred keeping them away from populated grassy fields anyway. He put his hands near the dirt of a garden box to let the ladybug fly where it wanted to go, and it went straight past his head and toward Todd. When Neil turned around he saw that it was on Todd's nose. "It likes you."

Todd went cross eyed trying to look at the bug on his nose. "That's good, right?"

"Of course it's good. It's a ladybug," Neil said and again was wishing that he liked Todd because the image of Todd with ruffled hair from a semi-violent game with an amazed look on his face and a ladybug on his nose was something he wanted to commit to memory. It was an

image he wanted to have of someone he loved, but it'd have to do because it was too adorable not to commit to memory anyway. Neil took it in for a few moments and then urged the ladybug off Todd's face. "Come on, buddy." This time when Neil brought the bug toward the garden boxes, it chose to fly into some weeds and start crawling around there. Neil turned around again, tapped the tip of Todd's nose, and walked away to join their friends.

"They jumped over the wall using my bike?" Ginny was asking as he walked back up.

"The kid is crafty," Charlie said, and then realized that Neil was standing right behind him. He threw an arm around his shoulder and rubbed his knuckles into Neil's hair. "Crafty little scamp. Isn't that right?"

"Get off of me."

"Ha! No." Charlie tried to stay annoying, but Knox shoved him off and then looked at Neil and Todd, who had also joined the group.

"So, what do you guys want?" He asked.

Neil and Todd looked at each other. What *did* they want? As far as he knew, Neil just wanted to beat Charlie and Ginny, and he was kind of starting to regret the fact that he had actually succeeded. Ginny had definitely given him a bruise somewhere. Silently, they communicated between one another that neither of them had any idea what they wanted, so Neil turned back to Knox with a shrug.

"I hope you think of something, then," Ginny said, "Because we're moving on from this catastrophic failure."

"I wouldn't say failure," Sam said, "A valiant effort, maybe."

"Oh, shut up with your vocabulary," Ginny said.

"It's okay, it didn't apply to you," Sam responded, "Yours was definitely a failure. I was talking about Knox and I."

"Hey!"

"Ha!" Charlie laughed loudly and gave Sam a fist bump, pointing at Ginny. "You deserved that one."

"You're half of that failure, you know."

"And I accept that with pride."

—

Later in the day, when it was just getting dark outside, they were all sitting at the table on Ginny's back porch, enjoying the aesthetic of the sunset and lights that were attached to the little covering of the table. Ginny stood up and asked Neil for his help to get some snacks for them before they ordered a pizza for dinner or something, and Neil suspected something was up immediately. He tried to push it aside because, after all, he was always suspicious that Ginny was up to something, but that proved to be a bad decision when they entered the kitchen and Ginny cornered him at the counter.

"We need to talk," She said, "Because I think you're an idiot."

"Okay," Neil said calmly, trying to subtly regain some personal space by straightening up. "I agree, but what's up this time?"

"You like Todd," She said simply, "And I know what you said, but—"

Neil cut her off with an annoyed groan. "I knew you would say that. But listen—"

"No!" Ginny interrupted, "Charlie and I were talking about it when we were in prison." Ginny said it so seriously it nearly sounded like her and Charlie had actually shared some jail time together, which, honestly, wouldn't surprise Neil if that were to happen in the future. "You're just in denial still."

"How could I be in denial when I *want* to like him?" Neil responded, "You don't get it, Ginny! Ugh." He put his face in his hands and breathed out in frustration. "I would love to be crushing on Todd right now. He's perfect! But I can't, and I'm not, and I don't know why, and I think I'm broken!"

Ginny fell back with a saddened expression. "You're not *broken*, Neil. You just can't force who you fall in love with."

"But I need it to be him, Gin," Neil responded, "And everything else is *there*. It's so there that here you are harassing me in your kitchen to admit my crush like we're in the second grade. So I'm worried that it's not—I'm never—I already have everything else, so what if that's it? What if it never happens?"

"It will," Ginny said confidently, "If I know you, which I do, it will. I

promise you."

"You can't be that sure."

"I'm Ginny Danbury," She said with the same confidence as if she was saying that she was the president of the United States. "I'm always this sure."

"Okay, give me one reason," Neil said, "One thing that makes you so sure. One thing for me to hold onto so I don't give up because I'm *not* giving up on him."

"You're so weird, man," Ginny said, and Neil couldn't really disagree because he was already aware of that. Never had this ever been a problem in history before where someone wanted to love someone and couldn't, especially when they said stuff like *I need it to be him* and *I'm not giving up on him*. How was Neil not already head over heels? And kind of a scarier thought, what would he be like if he were in love with Todd? Ten times more intense? Ten times more disappointing? He couldn't disappoint Todd, so he was basically asking to be in love with him and keep it a secret for the rest of his life, but that was fine with him because he just wanted to love him. He could mourn over not being able to show him that love later. One step at a time. "Ladybugs don't just mean luck, you know?"

"I didn't know," Neil responded, "But go on."

"Do you believe in fate, Neil?" Ginny asked, "In soulmates?"

Fate. Sometimes he did, and he sure did believe in soulmates because he *wanted* Todd and him to be soulmates and you really couldn't hope for something like that without believing in it. And he always believed it to be fate that he ran into Jeffery Anderson's bad side because that led him to being friends with Todd, so he nodded his head. "Yeah, sure."

"I think with fate..." Ginny started, "...that it gives you some warnings sometimes. Like a choose-your-own-adventure book. You get to pick your fate, you know?"

"Yeah, sure," Neil said again, even though the real answer was something along the lines of *what the hell are you saying*, but he let her go on.

"Then think about it," She said and grabbed his hands, "About the ladybug."

"What about it?" Neil asked, and he wanted to know how she knew anything about what had just happened outside when he was fairly sure she was wrapped up in a separate conversation. "It landed on my nose and then flew onto Todd's."

"Ladybugs also mean love," She said, "And I know that whenever *I* have tried to get a ladybug to crawl off of someone else and onto me: it never does it easily. So each time you're about to give up, why don't you just look in the mirror and ask about the ladybug. Why would it do that if you and Todd weren't meant to love each other?"

"No, Todd can't love me," Neil said and pulled himself away from her intense stare. "That's—No. He can't."

"Here's the thing, Neil," Ginny stepped forward, and Neil could've confused her with an old portrait of the Greek goddess Athena because that's how she always looked when she was giving advice. "You can't control that either."

"If he does, I'm going to let him down," Neil said with a teary tone, "And I can't do that. Not ever."

"Then don't," Ginny replied simply, "It's not even something you have to worry about right now. One foot in front of the other, alright? Just focus on this right now. Focus on the ladybug."

"Okay," Neil breathed, trying to focus on the tone of her voice and the comfort he found in it to avoid falling into his self-deprecating spiral of thoughts. "The ladybug."

Good thing he'd committed that image to memory because he was never going to stop thinking about that ladybug.

Chapter End Notes

a 6000 words for all of u < 3

Eighth—King's Keys

Chapter Summary

It's the last day of Ginny's birthday weekend.

Chapter Notes

CW// implicit self-harm mentions, smoking

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chet Danbury came home on Sunday morning before any of them had woken up. He had the decency not to be a raging asshole when he arrived home, letting his sister and the friends he knew she had over continue to sleep, but beyond that, his decency was limited. Neil woke up to Ginny shouting downstairs, looked around, and saw that everybody else was groggily getting up too. He volunteered to go see who Ginny was about to murder and was met with the shock of his life when he rubbed out the blurriness of his eyes and saw Chet Danbury standing there, shirtless and gross. Ginny was still in her nightgown, pointing a very threatening finger in her brother's face; however, Chet did not seem threatened.

"You said you wouldn't be home till' tonight!" Ginny shouted, "You *said!"*

"That was before I found out Chris could come over."

"Chris is coming?" Ginny dropped her finger and asked. "Well—no, never mind that. You said you'd stay out until tonight. You're ruining our last day."

Neil carefully walked down the stairs and up behind Ginny, placing a hand on her shoulder. She didn't jump at all at his sudden appearance. "It's alright, Gin. Not that big a deal, honestly."

"See? Listen to your friend." Chet pointed at Neil and then stuck his hand out. "I'm Chet by the way."

Neil furrowed his eyebrows. He had gone to school with this kid for at least three years. "Dude, I know."

Chet dismissed this comment and used his outstretched hand to straighten out his hair, definitely acting too smooth for an idiot who

had forgotten that Neil *very well* knew who he was. Then he ignored whatever glare Ginny was giving him and flopped over the back of the couch to turn on the TV and watch the Sunday morning cartoons. Ginny took a very angry breath and Neil led her to the kitchen, where she propped her elbows up on the island and held her head. He filled up a cup of water and slowly slid it over to her. She grabbed it and took a sip, then let out an annoyed groan. "Is everyone awake?"

"Mostly," Neil answered, taking the water from Ginny and sipping it himself. "But I bet as soon as we're back up there Charlie will be out again. I could get Todd to fall back asleep. Maybe we could wake up and pretend the morning just started?"

Ginny laughed. "That's sweet, Neil, but it's alright. At the least I get to see Chris."

Upon asking, Neil learned that Chris was Chet's super nice girlfriend that he definitely didn't deserve to have. Neil suggested for appropriate revenge that they could steal Chris for the whole night, and Ginny agreed that plan was worth a try. It was something they could worry about later, though, so right then, they just grabbed some muffins from the pantry and headed back upstairs, passing them out to their tired friends, excluding Charlie, who was, indeed, asleep again. Knox's fingers were drifting carefully through Charlie's hair, but Neil pretended not to notice. To be fair, Knox probably didn't notice he was doing it either. It was just one of those things he did when he was close to Charlie.

"Hey." Sam sat up, stretched across the entire bed to where Ginny was sitting on the edge, and poked her shoulder. "Happy Birthday."

"Oh," Ginny said suddenly, "*Oh.* It is my birthday, isn't it?"

Neil jumped from his bed to Ginny's and tackled her to the mattress, not giving any mercy to Sam whose body was basically anywhere they could've landed. He poked Ginny all around, making sure to hit all her super ticklish spots, and ruffled her hair. "Teenage Ginny! Look out world!"

"If the world wasn't *already* looking out it's kinda on them now if something bad happens," Sam said and pulled himself up to move over and sit with Todd on the other bed where no violence was happening. Neil stopped his torment on Ginny and watched Sam sit next to Todd, but when his hair was pulled he was right back to fighting with her. "Is now a good time to mention that Avery is gonna stop by tonight?"

"No shit," Ginny said and pushed Neil off of her with enough strength to throw him to floor and into the side of Knox's empty cot. As he collided with the makeshift bed, she hopped up with wide, excited eyes. "She is? Really?"

"She has a present," Sam replied, "Wanted to drop it off herself."

"Oh, yay!" Ginny shouted and jumped up and down, transferring her excitement into a series of loud claps that ending up waking Charlie. "Maybe we should just make it a bit of a party then tonight? Call up some of the Henley girls—oo!" She lunged forward to Todd and grabbed his shoulder, efficiently scaring the crap out of him. "You guys can invite Meeks and Pitts! It'll be a whole thing!"

"It'll be a whole *thing* to get them here," Knox said, annoyed. He'd been annoyed since he'd discovered that Chet Danbury was downstairs, and Neil was sure he'd be complaining later about how he'd been promised that he wouldn't have to even think about Chet. "Hager barely let *us* come."

Neil saw a sadness coming over Ginny's face and scrambled up from where he'd be laying splayed against the cot to talk before her expression had the chance to completely change. "Doesn't mean we can't try. I can call Nolan right now. Maybe pull a few strings?" He looked over at Todd. "Jeffery Anderson owes me a couple of favors."

Okay, maybe he shouldn't have looked over at Todd when he said that because now Todd looked extremely concerned. "How?"

"Nothing serious!" Neil assured quickly, "I am just kind of like... Cameron's debate babysitter, and I've saved them from a few pickles—that's all. So he owes me. I can get him to sweet talk Nolan or something."

"You'd do that?" Ginny asked, "Waste your favors from Jeffery Anderson?"

"The fuck else would I need them for?" Neil angrily asked, looking toward the wall so he didn't have to see anyone's reaction to his sudden hostility. It had become harder for him to say anything about Jeffery without immediately getting angry. "I'll just get it out of the way now. Anything else I need from him I can get."

After that, the day went by kind of fast, and Neil hardly remembered all of what they did. It wasn't a boring day by any means, but there were a lot more people to worry about and lot more conversations to

remember. Ginny broke out her fancy birthday dress to wear at her impromptu birthday party. It was very flowy and pretty and she had braided her hair down the side of her head to match the vibe of her outfit. She looked like a fairy, basically, and Neil felt bad that he hadn't gotten the fairy a present, so during the party he snuck out the back gate and ran down the gated community's sidewalk until he ended up at the golf course. Ginny loved to bring Sam and Neil there during the summer... because they weren't actually allowed there, and those kind of places were their favorite places to go. He followed their previous paths until he ended up by the golf course's lake. Right on the water's edge was a patch of grass and flowers. He fell in the middle of it and started picking all the flowers he thought would go with Ginny's dress. If she was going to look like a fairy, Neil would make her a present to complete the look.

He was halfway through the very beginning weave of the flower crown he was crafting when he heard the soft padding of someone else walking up in the grass. For a moment, Neil thought he was done for—that a golf course security guard was about to throw him in a cell—but when he looked up he saw that it was just Todd.

"Oh, hey."

"Hey." Todd sat down cross-legged in the grass across from him and looked down to see what he was doing. "Everything alright?"

"Yeah, uh-huh." Neil focused back on his weaving, incorporating the first flower of many. "I just realized that I didn't get Ginny a birthday present, and I felt kind of bad about it, so I'm whipping something up real quick."

"And what are you whipping up?" Todd asked.

"A flower crown," Neil answered and held up the braided grass so Todd could see it better. "They only last a little before the flowers start dying, but I figure she'll like having it in her birthday pictures."

Todd smiled at the beginnings of the crown as Neil set his hands back in his lap. "You really like Ginny, huh?"

"Yeah, I mean... I really care about her. She's—" Neil cut himself off, sighing and setting the crown down in the grass for a moment. Him and Todd hadn't really acknowledged the fact that Neil was *out,* per se, and Neil was kind of planning to *never* acknowledge it. He didn't want Todd to find out that he had actually never intended to tell him., but it was hard to explain how large an impact Ginny had on him

without explaining *why* she had made that impact. "Well, that *thing* you found out on Friday? She's the one who helped me figure it out. Her type of therapy is kind of... relentless."

"You're telling me that Ginny helped you realize that you like boys?" Todd asked, and Neil tried to ignore his eyebrow raise, hoping that he wouldn't ask why Neil hadn't told him sooner or if everybody except him had already known.

He looked down for a moment. "Yeah. Kind of."

Todd's pauses and silence terrified Neil, but then he said, "That just kinds of sound insulting."

Neil laughed out all of his worries and shoved Todd's knee. "If that's the way you take it, but that's not the way I'm saying it."

"Whatever you say," Todd said and handed him one of the flowers from the pile he had made, making sure that it matched the kind of vibe Neil was starting the crown off with. "Did she teach you how to do that?"

"No. Sam did. He's into crafty stuff like this," Neil answered, "Kind of an artist, that kid."

"Makes sense," Todd said, "Especially if he's Avery's younger brother."

"Oh, yeah." Sometimes Neil forgot that Todd knew who Avery was. "They're close. He thinks she's the bee's knees."

"Really?"

"Yeah. They have this whole plan to go to Broadway together."

For at least thirty minutes, Neil and Todd sat in the mini-flower field and just talked. Neil tried to show Todd how to make his own flower crowns, but his fingers were much too shaky to actually keep steady enough to do so, so he instead continued handing Neil the supplies he needed.

Once he was done, Neil set the crown atop his head and looked over at Todd. "What do you think?"

"I think you look like an elf."

"Shut up." Neil took it off and stared at it. "Is it good?"

"Yes, Neil, it's good. She's gonna love it," Todd answered, using that tone he always did when Neil was unsure about something he'd done. Then he stood up and held out his hand to Neil. "Now let's go. I wanna meet Chris."

They snuck back through the golf course and down the road, unsuccessfully pretending that they'd never left because, of course, all their friends had noticed their disappearance. Neil didn't let them think anything, however, walking right up to Ginny and presenting her with the present. She was ecstatic and threw it right on her head, twirling around like she was a child rather than someone had just turned thirteen. The sparkly fabric of her dress floated gracefully with her twirl and Neil felt like he had just crowned her the new fairy princess. Todd lightly punched Neil on the arm to get his attention, and when he looked back he saw the silent *I told you so* smile on Todd's face. Neil rolled his eyes at him and turned back to see Ginny skipping up to another girl and pointing to the crown. This girl was blonde with short hair and *incredibly* pretty, and she gave Ginny a fond smile and a pat on her head. Somehow, Ginny got even happier.

Charlie walked up and leaned his elbow on Neil's shoulder while letting out an obnoxious whistle. Before Neil could tell him to, for the love of God, stop doing that whistle, he pointed at the blonde girl. "*That* is Chris."

"That's Chris?" Neil asked, "And she's—wha—Chet?"

"Yup," Charlie said, "Real sad, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Pitts said, kind of startling Neil because he had forgotten that him and Meeks were also there now. Pitts was deadset on staring at Chris, not letting up on the heart-eyes look at all. "It's always the pretty ones."

Meeks shoved his shoulder. "Stop being weird."

"I'm *appreciating* her beauty," Pitts said back, breaking his stare for a moment to give Meeks a look. "Someone's gotta."

"What do you think Chet is focusing on?" Knox asked in an angry tone, also having appeared near the group. "Her personality?"

Charlie looked over at him. "And what're you so mad about, Knoxious?"

Knox refused to make eye contact. "Nothing."

"You are all being weird," Neil said to them because, no matter if Meeks was yelling at Pitts, they were *all* staring over at that poor girl. Everyone except Todd at the very least because Todd was always good at singling himself out—in a good way!—like how he was the only one to never get wet when they hung out at the docks. In everyone else's defense, they did *barely* set eyes on members of the female species, but it wasn't like they'd all been eye-fucking *Ginny* the second they got there. Everyone started defending themselves against Neil's words, so he just rolled his eyes and walked away from them and toward Ginny and Chris.

"Neil! C'mere!" Ginny pulled him into her and Chris's conversation by his elbow like he wasn't already planning on joining, and presented him to Chris like he was her son who had just won an award. "This one right here!"

"Oh, Ginny," Chris said, her voice soft and angelic. She reached forward and set her hand atop Ginny's. "Don't skin him."

"No big deal, really," Neil said, getting her attention and feeling like he was under some sort of judgement when her eyes were focused entirely on him. "She's done worse." When he said that, Chris laughed and Ginny let go of him. Neil wasn't going to say that Chris *wasn't* a goddess, but he also thought Ginny was just as pretty, and, he hated thinking it, but she deserved to have all the boys looking at her too. He didn't *want* them to—it was weird, and he didn't even want his friends to be looking at Chris— but Ginny deserved it too, alright? It was the thought that counted. He stuck his hand out to Chris. "Neil Perry."

"Chris Noel," She responded and took his hand, shaking it a singular time. Her skin was very soft and good thing Neil was over his *everything ever is attractive and will immediately make me unholy* episode because this wouldn't have been helping. She dropped his hand and looked over his shoulder. "Are those your friends?"

Neil didn't have to check to see who she was talking about. There was no one else it could've been. "Yeah, sorry about them."

"It's alright," Chris dismissed, "Their stares are much more proper than public school boys. It's kind of a relief actually."

"They're still creeps," Neil argued.

Chris smiled at his sudden defensiveness. "Yeah, I know."

"*Well...*" Ginny interrupted, "Neil is the guy I met over the summer. The one I've been telling you about?"

Neil turned to her. "You've been talking about me?"

"Shut up," Ginny responded, "A little bit."

"Nothing much," Chris assured, "Just a lot about your delicate sexuality."

"Ginny!"

Chris laughed, distracting Neil from the slap he was about to give Ginny. "No! Don't worry about it! You're not a kid if you *don't* have a delicate sexuality at some point."

He stared at her. "You think so?"

"I know so."

—

Everyone was sitting in the upstairs den talking, including Chet and Chris. Chet was very bored and barely paying attention, however, so thankfully it felt like he wasn't even there. Every second spent with Chris was another second none of the boys understood how she could be dating Chet Danbury. Maybe somebody needed to tell her about the stunt he'd pulled at their last sports tournament and it would snap her out of it. It was both impressive and indecent. Mostly just indecent, but Neil was a prankster himself and he couldn't ignore when there was effort put in.

Neil was sitting on the floor, but he could see Charlie fidgeting in his spot on the couch, and he knew that he had chewed up at least ten toothpicks that day, so it wasn't a mystery what had to be bothering him. Neil made eye contact with him and nodded his head toward the window, furthering the question by making a smoking gesture with his fingers. Charlie nodded at that and stretched, reaching down and fumbling with his shirt pocket, eventually pulling out a cigarette. He knocked his shoulder into Ginny, who was sitting right next to him, and waved the object around in her face until she recognized what it was. "Could I?"

Ginny looked to be actually considering this for a second. She knew that Neil smoked, and she wasn't the biggest fan. She'd even tried offering him a lifetime supply of chewing gum, but he'd turned it

down. Discovering that her new best friend Charlie Dalton also smoked wasn't a very exciting moment for her, Neil could tell, but Neil could also tell that she wasn't going to tell him no. She took a breath and then said, "Outside."

Charlie leaned over and pecked her on the cheek. "That's my birthday girl."

He hopped out of his seat, and Chris, who had for some reason decided that sitting next to him was a good idea, scooted closer to Ginny, allowing Meeks, who had been sitting on the arm of the couch trying to be involved, to fall onto the couch. Ginny, at the least, looked a little bit happier having Chris next to her.

Charlie looked over his shoulder at Neil, and he figured that he must've looked like he needed a smoke too because soon Charlie was waving his hand and urging Neil to join him. He tried to meet eyes with Ginny so he could also ask for her permission, but then he thought that maybe it would be better if he just crept away. By the time he was out the door, Charlie was already somehow downstairs walking out into the backyard. Neil swore that kid could've won an Olympic race if there was a smoking area at the end of a race track covered in no smoking signs. He shook his head at his friend and then headed for the stairs.

Neil stopped when he heard Todd's voice and footsteps behind him. "Neil, wait."

He turned around. "What?"

"Can you not?" Todd said, "Smoke, I mean. I just—I don't want to make you or anything but, I—it would make me feel—you don't do it to hurt yourself do you? I can't let you if that's why you do it."

Neil didn't really know why he did it, and he *had* considered the possibility that maybe it was to purposefully hurt himself. However, he'd come to the conclusion that it wasn't, and he hated that it worried Todd, but he also hated the idea of having to push down another urge to smoke. He'd already done it so many times that month, chewing down pencils and cracking open pens while holding himself back. What he actually needed was a whole one when he got back to Welton, but he couldn't *not* go with Charlie if he was about to go out and smoke right then. Neil looked at the carpeted ground. "I don't think that's why I do it."

"You don't *think*?" Todd asked.

"No," Neil confirmed, "I'm not—I've kept my promise, Todd. Smoking isn't like *that*. It's bad, but just in the regular nicotine addiction type way, you know?"

Neil never liked it when Todd looked up at him with a worried look through his bangs, but unfortunately it happened often, and it was happening right then. "And you're sure? You're not lying to me?"

"I don't lie to you," Neil said, "You're the only person I never lie to." That seemed to strike a chord with Todd, for he said nothing else and slipped back down the hallway and out of Neil's view. Neil stared at where Todd had been standing for a moment before taking a breath and heading downstairs again. When he got to the backyard, Charlie was swinging slowly on the swing set exhaling his cigarette smoke into the evening air. Neil approached. "Pass it."

"Demanding," Charlie coughed, but handed it over as Neil sat in the swing next to him. "What took you so long? Expected you down here two minutes ago."

"Todd," Neil answered and took an inhale of the cigarette, "Had to talk to him for a second."

"I see," Charlie responded, "Where are you on that, by the way?"

Neil narrowed his eyes at the question. Charlie very well knew where he was on that. "Where are you and Knox?"

"Fair enough," Charlie said, rescinding his previous question and focusing on actually getting some momentum with his swinging. "Was no one going to tell me that Avery was Sam's sister?"

"What did you think she was?" Neil asked with the cigarette dangling from his mouth.

"His girlfriend?"

Neil let out something between a gag and a laugh at that, choking on the smoke in his throat. "No. Not at all."

"Well, I figured that out when a grown woman walked into the house!" Charlie yelled, "But for a moment, I was worried."

"God," Neil shook his head at the disgusting image Charlie was planting in his head. "That wouldn't even—Sam's gay, Charlie."

"Oh shit, my bad," Charlie said like he hadn't just conjured up a horrifyingly stupid assumption. "So he's part of the queer club with us then, huh? Makes sense."

Neil passed the cigarette back to him. "How do you mean?"

"I think he's sweet on Todd," He answered and then looked Neil up and down, "I think he's sweet on you, too. Maybe you guys could work out some sort of an arrangement."

"On Todd?" Neil asked, ignoring whatever else Charlie was deciding to imply. He was way too focused on worrying about the thing he'd been worrying about all weekend—Todd and Sam, so rather than give any thought to Charlie's gross jokes, he jumped right on his usual denial train. "No, I don't think so. I know Sam. He doesn't—I mean, he's not. He's not 'sweet on Todd.'"

"Calm down, cowboy," Charlie said at his franticness. "There are some signs there. Sam might. We don't know for sure."

"I do," Neil argued, "And he doesn't."

"He might."

"Well, he can't!" Neil's words exploded out of him when he truly did not mean for them too. He shrunk in on himself and refused to look at the look he knew Charlie was giving him. The 'man you are *so* wrong about not liking Todd' expression that basically everyone gave him nowadays. Once Neil finally met his friend's eyes again, he repeated, quieter this time, "He can't."

"Why not?"

"Cause it's not fair," Neil mumbled, "It's not fair that he might and I can't."

"Oh so now you *can't?"*

"I don't think so," Neil answered honestly. Even though Charlie was only meaning to mock him, he'd accidentally got Neil into much deeper of a mood than he'd meant to. He hadn't meant to get Neil in a deep mood at all. "Ginny told me to shove it, but I think I'm broken, Charlie. I'm not even sure anymore if I actually liked Mira."

"You liked Mira," Charlie affirmed, "And you like Todd."

"But I don't!"

"Okay, you don't," Charlie agreed, though, of course, he never actually agreed. He was just saying that to calm Neil down. "But you *do,* and I think I might understand what's happening. It's in there in your heart somewhere—the feelings for Todd. They're just hypothetically locked in a... cage... of sorts."

"A dungeon?" Neil suggested.

"Yes! A dungeon," Charlie snapped and then continued, "They're there, but they're in a dungeon, okay? All of your feelings are in a big ol' feeling dungeon, let's say, and you're the prison guard, naturally, so you have a couple of the keys, alright? When you met Mira, the... counselor... wrote a little letter to you, the prison guard, and said, 'hey I think you can unlock cell 2B' or something like that."

Neil was barely following. "How do you come up with these things?"

"Shut up," Charlie said quickly, "Here's the thing: you're the prison guard... but you don't have all the keys. The *king* does because if you decide to turn on him and try to take down the kingdom, it'd be easier to do if you had all the keys that keep all the kingdom's criminals locked away, right? So he can't have you having all of the keys, now can he? It's simply idiotic."

"The king doesn't trust me?" Neil asked.

"The king doesn't trust anybody."

"I feel like you're losing your relatability here."

"Well, all of it can't be relatable, okay? Focus on the main parts, Socrates," Charlie said, moving on quickly, "The king—he's given some of these keys to other people for the safety reasons. Like—*oo* okay, listen—*I* had your best friend key because obviously not just *anyone* could be your best friend. The king interviewed a whole lot of people and decided that I was the one to give it to... no, wait, that sounds stupid. Uh—it was my *fate* to have the key. My birthright or something. Family legacy. Key's been in my family for decades. Are you following?"

"Not at all."

"Okay, good. So your *love* feelings are locked up, alright? You can't have that key. First kiss key, first crush key, first relationship key—

you can have all those, but the love key—that's the most important one, so the king gave it to someone else," Charlie said and he was acting out an incredibly confusing demonstration of this elaborate heart dungeon with his hands. "My bet is that Todd has it. He just hasn't figured out how to use the damn thing yet. He's not a locksmith. He doesn't know where the key goes let alone how to unlock something with it! So you see? The king is keeping it locked because he knows it's not time yet, but the feelings are still *there*. You're not broken."

Charlie looked at him expectantly, as if Neil was about to break into applause, but Neil was feeling the opposite of that. He felt more like punching Charlie in the face because what the *hell* had he just said? "*... what?"*

"Okay, think about it for a few seconds and maybe you'll get it," Charlie said, rushed.

"Who is the king?"

"I don't know? God?" Charlie shrugged, "Marilyn Monroe?"

"Marilyn Monroe?" Neil repeated.

"Yeah, maybe. Who knows? But you gotta trust your king." Neil decided not to bring up the hypocrisy of the king not trusting him but him having to trust the kind in Charlie's stupid metaphoric heart dungeon. "He's trying, and he doesn't appreciate you referring to that trying as broken. It's quite mean, actually. He's working hard, Neil."

"Stop with your weird metaphors," Neil said and stood up off the swing, stomping the cigarette out when Charlie threw it on the dirt in front of their feet. "Can't you learn how to give advice normally for once?"

"I *do* give normal advice," Charlie asserted and stood up too. "But I told you: I've no idea how to explain to you what you're dealing with right now. That was the best I could do. Take it or leave it. Hug it or chuck it."

"Hug it or...?—you know what, I don't care." Neil waved away all of Charlie's similes and metaphors and turned around to go back inside. He hated to admit it, but while he was walking back up the stairs in silence, Charlie's dungeon thing was starting to make more sense. Neil had basically forced his crush on Mira onto himself. He could've backed out of spin the bottle. He said yes to being Mira's boyfriend.

He *did* have those keys, he supposed, but when falling in love with someone... well, Ginny was right. You couldn't choose that. You had no control over it. Debatably, the person you end up falling in love with does.

And you know what? The idea that Todd had that key instead of Neil —it made him feel better. He trusted Todd, and sure it was a metaphorical key in a very weird, shaky metaphor, but... he still trusted him with it. If anyone knew what was going to be best for Neil, it was Todd.

Chapter End Notes

was the dungeon metaphor me characterizing charlie as a fumbling prophet or me just barely knowing how to write?

thats a secret ill never tell

xoxo gossip girl

Eighth—Trust

Chapter Summary

> Neil gets a call from someone and an explanation he didn't ask for.

Chapter Notes

> CW// smoking
>
> idk how long it has been since the last chapter but i am running out of ideas to proLONG THIS SLOW BURN
>
> also i did not edit this, just typed and posted, so excuse any mistakes

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil paid attention to little details, and he was the type of friend who knew what you wanted before you even did. He snapped off the metal tabs of Coke cans for Charlie when he was giving him a soda because he knew that was how Charlie drank them. He twisted the tab around and stuck a straw in it when he was giving a can to Knox because that's how Knox drank his sodas. Ginny only drank purified water that was cold, always having to refrigerate a bottle she'd bought from a vending machine during the club, so Neil bought her a metal water bottle that would cool faster and keep her water cold longer. Meeks had a bad habit of scratching up his glasses while wiping them on his shirt, so Neil always snuck his glasses case, with a proper rag in it, into Meeks' book bag or back pocket. Pitts forgot pencils all the time, so Neil always had an extra. He was that kind of friend, and the only thing he didn't notice was that he *was* that type of friend. So to someone trying to hide something from him, his observing skills were so, *so* annoying. On top of that, Neil was somehow annoyingly *oblivious* so, once again, when someone was trying to hide something from him, he always noticed things that made them worry they were about to get caught, only to reveal that he knew it for some random reason—like it was some sort of comedic relief.

Basically, Neil was the boss on a sitcom that would walk in on his employee (a.k.a. the main character) digging around for something in his office and assume something like *oh you're getting a head start on that project! What an efficient worker!* Instead of getting them in trouble

for snooping around. Yeah, that was Neil. People trying to lie to him found it irritating.

That day, he was doing his history reading on his bed and leaning against the wall. Todd was sitting at Neil's desk doing his own homework. They weren't talking and they were in their regular comfortable silence. Well, as comfortable as you could be while being touch-starved again. After Ginny's birthday weekend, Neil went back to his regular not-touching-anyone-especially-not-Todd behavior, but he was a little better this time around. He had a better idea what he was going through and knew how to push it aside, so it wasn't his biggest issue, and he was barely thinking about it. He was focusing primarily on World War II, not believing that it had been very recent. Charlie was right. Welton kind of didn't care about the Jewish until they were learning about the Holocaust.

Neil was sure that Charlie probably had some emotional trauma knowing something like that happened to people like him, but mostly he seemed to just be profiting off of it by skipping History class. It honestly didn't matter and Neil wasn't going to judge. Charlie was the Jewish one, he could do what he wanted. All Neil could do was shut up and learn about the horrifying events of recent history. However, it was pretty heavy for him as a fourteen-year-old, so he decided a break was in order. He shut the book and set it besides himself, turning his head slightly to see what Todd was doing. He seemed to be still working away on some homework, but Neil and his observation skills knew that wasn't the case.

Todd did his homework with a pen because he thought that he would be less likely to make a mistake if he knew he couldn't erase it. For school work, Todd only wrote down things that he was absolutely sure of, so he did it rather slowly as well. But right then, Neil noticed, Todd was writing fast with a pencil, not even using the eraser to get rid of mistakes. He would just viciously scribble stuff out, and Neil knew that Todd would never treat his school work like that. He became curious, silently crawling over to take a peek over Todd's shoulder and see what he was doing. Good thing for Neil, Todd was really good at being in his own little world when he was focused, so he didn't take notice to Neil leaning over until he was right next to his face.

When Todd did notice, he jumped in fear from Neil's seemingly sudden appearance, but that didn't prevent him from flipping over his notebook page immediately. That was what piqued Neil's interest, so he continued hovering over Todd. "What are you doing?"

Todd refused to look at him. "Nothing. Homework."

"Nice try. What is it?" Neil tried reaching forward, but Todd slapped his wrist like he disciplining a cat. Neil pulled back and cradled it to his chest. "Hey!"

"I told you it was nothing."

"And I told you that was a nice try," Neil responded, climbing over the edge of his bed and standing over Todd, hoping this would intimidate him or something. He wasn't sure whether or not it was working. "Come on, what is it? What are you doing?"

"None of your business."

"Then do it on Charlie's desk."

"I don't want to touch Charlie's side of the room."

"Boohoo," Neil said, and then waited for a moment before snatching the notebook off of his desk and backing away. Todd was up immediately and yelling at him, but Neil could only laugh as he tripped on his bed and fell back on it. "Alright, let's see." Neil scooted backward on his bed while Todd basically jumped on top of him and grabbed wildly for the notebook, still screaming at him to stop. Neil flipped through the pages and looked for the one Todd had been working on. Once he found it, he only managed to read the first line before Todd clawed his notebook out of Neil's hand and held it tightly to himself. Neil was out of breath, still sitting on his bed, but Todd had jumped away and was on the other side of the room by the time Neil had collected himself. "Todd Anderson, are you writing poetry?"

"Shut up," Todd snapped, "I'm not writing shit. You're stupid, and—and blind! And you can't read!"

"I thought you hated English!" Neil ignored all of the insults.

"I hate our English *teacher*," Todd corrected, but then continued on his tirade. "And it doesn't matter. You're dumb, and... shut up. No more talking."

Neil was silent for a moment, but only because he was formulating a plan. "Let me read it."

"Wha—No! What about 'no more talking' made you think—No. Out of the question."

Neil stood up and clasped his hands together, trying his best to put on a pleading look that would break Todd. "Please?"

"You're not *cute*," Todd said, and then mocked, "But *nice try*."

"I wanna read it!"

"You can't always get what you want!"

"Maybe *you* can't," Neil responded, "But I *always* get what I want." Todd thought that Neil was going to lunge forward and try to attack him, but Neil, surprisingly, didn't. He swiftly turned around and dropped to the floor, reaching under his bed and pulling out his suitcase. Throwing it open, he dug through extra clothes and things he liked hiding under his bed until he pulled out a relatively thin booklet. He popped back up and flipped through it, successfully confusing Todd. He looked up and perked an eyebrow at him like he had no reason to be confused. "What?"

"What... are you doing?"

"You're not showing me cause' you're embarrassed, right?" Neil asked and pointed at the notebook. "That's why you never show me your poetry. You haven't even brought up the fact that you write it since the fifth grade."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

Neil turned the booklet over so Todd could see the cover. Twelve Angry Men. "Mira gave me this screenplay last year, and when I couldn't go see it I read through it like twenty times. Sometimes I practice Juror number nine's monologue. Charlie walked in on me once and it was the worst." Todd obviously still didn't know what this had to do with anything, but now he was also confused why Neil was so embarrassed about it. Neil sang *Spanish Rose* from Bye Bye Birdie about every chance he got. Neil still reacted negatively to his confusion. "What now?"

"What're you embarrassed for? You love acting."

"You love writing," Neil responded, "But... vulnerability, right? We put ourselves in the stuff we do and we're scared of people judging it, so I'm offering a compromise. Let me read your poem and I'll perform Juror number nine's monologue."

"No," Todd said instantly.

Neil broke his serious demeanor and whined, "Come on! Why not!? That's a perfectly good compromise."

"A perfectly good compromise and I reserve the right to say *no*," Todd turned his chin up at his friend and plopped himself back down in the desk chair as Neil stared at him. He must've really not wanted Neil to read it, which made him want to read it even more. He walked back over to the edge of his bed and angrily sat down as Todd turned to a new page in his notebook, got out his Science book, and picked up a pen. Neil knew that Todd's mind had been made, so he picked up his History book again and opened it back up. His angry silence caused Todd to tap his pen until he eventually broke, *"What?"*

"What, what?" Neil echoed, not even looking up from his book.

"You know what, what," Todd repeated, slamming the pen down and turning to Neil. "So *what?"*

"Nothing," Neil slowly turned a page, "What, yourself."

"I don't need a what," Todd responded, "You do."

Neil shrugged. "I don't think so."

Todd closed his Science book. "Are you really that upset I won't show you?"

"That's not it," Neil said, "I just know why you're not showing it to me, and that's *what*."

Todd's face paled and he dropped his pen. He scrambled to pick it back up and then coughed into his hand. "You—Why do you think I'm not showing it to you?"

"Cause' you don't trust me," Neil said simply, "I know you don't."

Neil didn't hear the heaving sigh of relief that Todd let out. He set his pen back on the desk and turned to Neil, shoving his book out of his lap so he would actually make eye contact with him. "I do."

"You said you don't," Neil said, "Anything I tell you—you say you don't believe me."

"I don't trust you with *you*," Todd clarified, "And sometimes I don't trust what you tell me, but I trust you *with* me."

Neil had no idea what that meant, so he let out a very beautiful sound

of, "Huh?"

"I trust you," Todd simplified, "I trust you with my life, Neil. Not believing you and not trusting you are two very different things. So, no, I don't believe you half the time, but I do trust you. I'll always trust you."

"So show me your poem," Neil said.

"Maybe later," Todd replied, "The study group is for Science tonight, right?"

"Yeah," Neil did not like the very quick shift of conversation. "Why?"

"Because I haven't got any done causa' you." Todd put his notebook on top of his Science book and stood from Neil's desk, grabbing the stack and carrying it out of Neil's room. He disappeared behind the closed door and Neil had no idea what just happened. All he knew was that he really wanted to read that poem. What other reason could Todd have for hiding it from him? What was it about? Maybe if Neil read Todd's poetry *then* he would fall in love with him. But, of course, Neil wouldn't read it if that's what Todd really wanted. He'd learned his lesson from the time he'd read Todd's journal.

After rubbing his hands on his face, Neil went over to Charlie's desk and pulled out a cigarette. He lit it and started inhaling it while leaning against the wall, but a knock on his door startled him into immediately putting it out and waving the smoke away. That turned out to be useless as another boy from his grade walked in and looked at him. "Perry, phone for you."

Neil followed the boy out and tried not to look into Todd's room to see what he was doing because he wasn't exactly happy that Todd had just left him. He pushed that aside however when he put the phone to his ear and was verbally attacked by Ginny Danbury. He held the receiver away from his face for a few seconds and then put it back to his ear. "You done?"

"Yeah, I'm done," Ginny said, "Did you catch any of that?"

Neil thought over the very loud rant. "No."

"I went over to Sam's house today," Ginny started, "But there was another girl there, right? She was talking to Sam and Avery and naturally I was like *okay who is this and why don't I know*, so I didn't let them continue until they introduced me."

Neil rolled his eyes. "Naturally."

"*So*..." Ginny said, "They introduce me to this girl and turns out she used to live here and she moved away just last summer, but she was still in town for the holidays. Her new school doesn't start again for another week."

"Yes?" Neil prompted so maybe Ginny would get to the point sooner.

"You wanna know who it was?"

"I guess so, Ginny."

"Mira. Lancaster."

Neil almost dropped the phone. Okay, he did drop the phone, but he tried to hide that from Ginny as he picked it back up again and pressed it unnecessarily close to his face. "What?"

"Oh, yeah, have some history do you?" Ginny said, and Neil could imagine her head was tilted and her hands were on her hips. "And you just weren't going to tell me."

"It didn't seem—why would I tell you? You didn't even know her!"

"Okay, maybe so, *but* the conversation got on the topic of you and I was blissfully unaware, so I launch into this whole rant about you because I love you."

"Thanks, Gin."

"You're so welcome," Ginny cut herself off super quick and then continued, "Imagine how badly I felt when she tells me she's your ex-girlfriend! I wouldn't want my ex-boyfriend's new best friend ranting to *me* about how good a guy he is. Then I find out *she* dumped *you*? Damn, Neil."

"You know what?" Neil asked, "Leave it alone. It was over a year ago. My ankle was broken and I was depressed."

"What's the difference now besides the fact your ankle isn't broken?"

"Screw off," Neil deadpanned, "Why are we even talking about this?"

"Because she's here," Ginny said, "And she wanted to talk to you, so I decided—"

"She's *what?"* Neil responded, and that's when he started really freaking out. He'd been convinced he'd never have to see or talk to Mira again, and he was alright with that considering the last time they'd spoken was when he had gotten broken up with. He was actually quite glad that had been their last conversation because the fact he wasn't sad at all surely would've been a big smack in the face to her, and Neil would hardly be able to explain that. That he was relieved? God, she didn't even know that Neil's father had told *him* to break up with *her*. He was planning on keeping all of this a secret, but Ginny Danbury was the bringer of chaos. "I don't—Ginny, I'm—"

"Yeah, yeah," Ginny dismissed, "I don't care what you are. She really wanted to talk to you about something, and she figured you wouldn't pick up a message from her without a clarification. So that's me. I'm the clarification."

"When did you *clarify* anything?" Neil asked through gritted teeth.

"Right now," She said, "To clarify: Mira needs to tell you something, so don't be a dick and hang up or anything."

"Okay." Neil rubbed the bridge of his nose and took a breath. "Put her on then."

There was a sound of rustling, and then Mira. "Hey, Neil." Neil felt horrible about the fact he barely remembered what she sounded like. He could picture her in his mind, but he couldn't remember any little details about her. He couldn't remember her eye color or her smile when Neil kept insisting that they were playing go-fish. Hell, he'd barely thought about her in the past year. He ran his hand through his hair until he realized that he needed to respond.

"Hi." *Good job, Neil, you're 1/100 of the way there.*

"How are you?"

"Dandy," Neil said, and Mira laughed at him. He didn't remember what her laugh sounded like. "How about you?"

"Dandy, as well, I'd say," She responded, "Look, Neil, I'm sorry about... last year."

"It's alright," He said, but then he coughed and lowered his tone to make it sound a little sadder. "Honestly."

"Yeah, probably, but I was kind of a jerk, and that was a stupid

reason," She went on, "I just didn't want to tell you the real reason right then. I figured you didn't need to hear it."

Neil felt his heart stop. "Sorry, the *real* reason?"

"Well, yeah, I mean... I knew what I was getting into when I started dating you. Breaking up with you because of your dad seems kind of redundant. I'm honestly surprised you didn't call me out for it," She explained.

Neil was sure he would've if he'd cared even a little bit more, but now he did care. "So what is it? Why'd you break up with me?" He was now terrified. At least that reason seemed fair enough, and it didn't really make the breakup seem like his fault. It wasn't like she'd broken up with him because she'd suddenly decided he was ugly or something. He was tapping his foot relentlessly on the ground as Mira ignored the question and instead went on to an apology about how badly she felt for lying. Neil appreciated it—that was his whole thing with Mira, appreciating things, but he was over it and he needed her to tell him the truth *now*. While he was anxiously waiting he felt a pressure on his shoulder and looked over to see Knox leaning against him with Meeks standing nearby.

Meeks leaned around Knox's head and whispered, "I said you looked anxious. He insisted we walked over."

Neil nodded as a thank you and clutched onto his new lifeline Knox Overstreet. Meeks gave a reassuring smile from a few feet to the right. Knox tilted his ear toward the phone so he could hear a little bit better, and Neil hoped that Mira wasn't about to say something super embarrassing. Mira had just wrapped up her explanation and apology, so Neil took his turn to talk. "It's alright, really, Mira. I just—what was the real reason, then?"

"Thing is..." Mira started, "I still don't think you're necessarily ready to hear it. Ginny says you are, but—"

"Wait," Neil interrupted, "You told *Ginny?"*

Mira took a breath at his accusatory tone. "Okay, fair enough, fair enough. I'll tell you."

"I'm waiting."

"Okay, and, keep in mind, I am *not* saying this in any hurtful kind of way, alright?"

Neil breathed heavily. "Alright."

"Promise you won't take it that way?"

Neil shifted on the balls of his feet. "Promise."

Mira took another breath. "Honest, Neil, you care too much about Todd. Not even like *too* much in general, but *so* much that I don't think you can care about anything else. Obviously you're smitten with him, and it was even clear to me. I just kind of shoved it off until I came to visit in person. And he—maybe I shouldn't."

"No, please keep going," Neil said quickly, and he was barely processing what she had already said, but he was desperate for her not to stop.

"It's not a bad thing," Mira reassured, "And I'm not saying you don't actually care about anything else. You do. But in *that* sense, you know, there's no room for other stuff for you. It's just Todd, and that's not a bad thing, again."

"I get it," Neil said, "But go on."

"And I didn't break up with you because I was like, jealous, or whatever, but I felt bad being part of your denial."

"My denial is a necessary part of my being," Neil argued, "Don't feel bad about that."

"I know, Neil," Mira replied, and that was the only thing she had said that actually bothered Neil. He was sensitive about his denial. "I don't feel bad about that, necessarily. But I felt bad for Todd. He is obviously so into you and you're so dedicated to him—it felt like I was torturing him. Like I was keeping you captive and away from him and you were just kind of into it."

"Like Stockholm syndrome," Ginny's voice said in the background.

Mira sighed. "Yeah, sure, like Stockholm syndrome."

Knox's presence disappeared from Neil's shoulder, and when he looked over he was standing next to Meeks, biting his nails, and staring at the ground. Neil made eye-contact with him, but Knox didn't hold it for long. Neil kept staring at him as he talked into the phone. "That's—I mean, you're right." He turned away and toward the wall so his friends couldn't hear him so well anymore. "I care about Todd more

than anything in the world, but I'm sure Ginny told you that I'm—"

Mira didn't let him try to explain. "Yeah, she did. Either way: like him or not, you're *dedicated* to him, Neil."

"That's probably true," Neil admitted, "I can see why you didn't want to tell me that."

"I knew you would," She said, "But I'm still sorry about lying."

Neil wrapped up the conversation with Mira and barely said anything to Ginny before hanging up the phone. He hit the back of his head against the wall and groaned in frustration because, now, officially *everyone* in his life (whose opinions mattered, and, of course, besides Todd) said that he was in love with Todd. Everyone but him knew what it felt like to live in a world where Neil Perry was in love with Todd Anderson. Out of all the reasons to get broken up with... really. Knox and Meeks didn't say anything to him as he leaned against the wall with his eyes shut, searching deep within himself again for the feelings everyone was saying were there. He searched and searched and he was sure he would never stop because he wanted to be in love with Todd more than anything, but after what felt like an hour, he gave up and opened his eyes.

Of course, Neil was oblivious, and his freaked-out mind completely grazed over what Mira had said about Todd being into him. That wasn't even a part of his worries. Knox was worrying about that more than he was. Neil wouldn't realize that Todd was equally as smitten with him as he was with Todd if it punched him in the face. He scurried back to his room, not really caring whether or not his friends followed him, and re-lit the cigarette he'd been smoking earlier. He barely noticed Charlie sitting on his bed reading a magazine until Charlie started talking.

"Rough day?"

Neil jumped and looked over to see Charlie smoking his own cigarette with a stupid smile on his face. He sighed some smoke out of his mouth and shook his head. "Maybe."

"Wanna talk about it?"

"What's there to talk about?" Neil asked.

"Plenty," Charlie said, closing his magazine and casting a glance over to the History book on Neil's bed. "The Holocaust?"

"I'm good, thanks."

"... Wanna kiss?"

Neil sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "No, Charlie, and don't say it—"

"See, you're still saying no! Your brain is still in the right place."

"I hate you."

Chapter End Notes

i luv u all <3
i start school soon but im a big procrastinator so dont worry about less updates lmao

Eighth—The Twinkle

Chapter Summary

Neil wraps up his final year before high school and finally reaches a longtime goal.

Chapter Notes

HI IM SO SORRY. 'dont worry about slow updates' MY ASS. HERE YOU GO BESTIES
I DID NOT EDIT JUST TYPED TOOK A SEVEN HOUR BREAK AND THREW IT UP SO EXCUSE ANY MISTAKES!!!

CW// smoking

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Second semester ended as quickly as it started because, of course, the one part of school Neil actually wanted to go slowly went by faster than he could say 'kill me.' He wasn't ready for high school. He knew everyone's expectations for him were going to go up, that he was going to be expected to act like an adult—the last time he'd been ready to act like an adult was right when he turned thirteen and he immediately broke his ankle. So excuse him if he didn't think being mature made for good outcomes.

On top of that, Neil barely saw any of his friends, let alone Todd, when he was studying for tests and doing classwork. The end of this year marked how his high school career would go, so as much as he hated it, he spent most of his time locked in his room practicing Algebra or reading about World War I. Sometimes, only sometimes, he was joined by Cameron, but everyone else got kicked out. Even Charlie—Neil told him to go kick rocks when he tried to come into his own room, which made him mad, but at the very least solidified their decision of putting in that roommate-change request.

Basically, even though it felt like the shortest semester ever, Neil was more stressed than he'd ever been. Every day was full of books and math and history and isolation. It felt more like one long day in an academic prison than it did a couple of months in a school year. And his prison sentence was brutal. In legal terms, he hadn't even attempted to apply for parole, because he wasn't only the criminal, he was the judge too, and Judge Perry would decide that criminal Neil

Perry deserved to stay in his cell for the remainder of his sentence. It was so bad that Neil wouldn't remember what grass felt like if it weren't for soccer training.

There was one bright spot in the middle of March, though, right before Spring Break. In legal terms, we'll call it visitation hours, but in real terms, we'll call it an intervention. After doing some makeup work, Neil was trekking back to his room to do *more* makeup work because he knew Charlie would be off doing who knew what. He hardly knew where Charlie was anymore. Usually he was with Knox, but lately it hadn't been that, he'd just been missing, and Neil was too busy to bother finding out where he was. As long as he made it back before lights out, Neil didn't care. He was caught in the hallway on the way back, though, by a boy who told him that he had a phone call, and he wanted to die.

Lately, when he had a phone call it was never good. First it started with Mira, then a call from Ginny saying she had to go MIA until Spring for unknown reasons, then Avery telling him that their acting club was indefinitely cancelled, and then a call from his parents 'checking up' on him ever since then. So he was planning on just picking up the phone and faking a hoarseness in his voice so he could get out of it that day, but right as he was about to start up a flurry of coughs, a voice that was decidedly not his mom's or dad's said something to him. It was Sam.

"Sam?" Neil asked, and the fake hoarseness took a few breaths to dissipate. Sam never called Neil. Sometimes he was there when Ginny called, which was also relatively rare, but never did he do it by himself. Not that Sam hated Neil or anything, quite the opposite most of the time, but he was the kind of person to never call in case he was a bother. Neil didn't know this, however, so he never called Sam himself to say *oh no you don't annoy me*! It was basically purgatory. "What's—how are you?"

"I'm fine," Sam answered, and he did sound fine, so Neil couldn't fathom why he was calling. Some super important reason, surely, but he didn't sound panicked or anything. "I just needed your help with something."

"Oh, what is it?" Needed his help with something? Yeah, cause he was *so* helpful.

"My parents are kicking Avery out," Sam disclosed, "Finally fed up with her putting off college, I guess. We're only halfway through

writing the play she planned on taking to college, and, you know her, she's kind of... refusing to leave while it's unfinished. I predict this isn't gonna end well."

"How am I gonna be any help?" Neil was bewildered at many aspects of everything he'd just been told. As far as he knew, Avery and Sam's parents were pretty supportive about Avery waiting it out. Maybe she'd finally gotten on their nerves or something. He also wondered what in the world Sam thought *he* was gonna do about it?

"You're good at coming up with stories," Sam said, "I wanted your help to get this thing done. Or done enough that Avery won't get herself killed."

"In one phone call?"

"It's all we got."

So Neil spent the next hour on the phone helping Sam plot out how the rest of his play would go, adding little details he should put in the script, developing characters, bouncing ideas off of him, and he ended up being plenty of help. So much help he was actually proud of himself by the time he'd hung up the phone. He'd done something good. In the middle of the current tornado of his life when he barely fed himself breakfast, he managed to help out a friend. He happily started to walk back to his room, but halfway there, he remembered that this good feeling was temporary, so he managed a steady pace back in order to savor the feeling for just a little bit longer. Once he opened the door, he would be back at his schoolwork and his prison sentence. No more visitation hours.

Or he thought so, at least. Until he walked in and saw Todd sitting on Charlie's bed, reading one of his magazines and resembling him way too much for Neil's liking. Neil thought Todd didn't notice his entrance at first, but after a couple of seconds, without looking at him, Todd stretched his arm out and handed Neil a cigarette, and when Neil was about to say he didn't have a lighter, Todd held that out too. Neil backed himself into a corner and lit it, silently studying Todd and the silence he refused to break. There was no way he was actually interested in Charlie's issue of Cosmopolitan magazine (Yes, Charlie had a Cosmopolitan subscription, and Neil had absolutely no idea how he managed to keep this subscription under wraps, let alone actually get the issues into the school), so Neil carefully sat at Charlie's desk and waited for Todd to at least give him a side-eye. It took a while, but he eventually did.

Todd saw that he was screwed as soon as he accidentally made eye contact, so he sighed and outed himself. "I thought if I was silent you wouldn't kick me out, but I didn't think you were going to sit there and stare at me."

"Worked in a roundabout way," Neil responded, "You confused me too much that I forgot to kick you out."

"But now?" Todd kept his eyes focused on the magazine's pages, trying desperately to not actually process any of the imagery.

"Now what?"

"Now you remember that you need to kick me out?"

"Oh," Neil said, like he had totally forgotten about his ability to do that. He looked over at his own desk where he had set down his school work and then back to his lap before taking a drag from the cigarette. Yes, he needed to kick Todd out. He had stuff to do. But he hadn't hung out with Todd—hell, said *a word* to Todd—in like two whole months. He felt calmer right then than he'd felt the entirety of the semester. But... he had stuff to do. "I guess."

Todd put the magazine down and actually looked at Neil. "Do you... not want to?"

"Not really," Neil stared ahead at the wall, "But I need to."

"Yeah."

The bed shifted slightly and Neil turned to see Todd ever-so-slowly sliding off Charlie's bed. He was moving at a tortoise's pace, and it was as unnerving as the silence hovering over both of them. Neil stared at his friend for what felt like a very long time, thinking about how nice it was to have him there. To have a friend right there, especially Todd, and to remember that he had other duties on Earth than schoolwork. Todd finally gave up and slid entirely off of the bed, getting ready to open the door and leave, but Neil stopped him. "You can stay."

Todd's hand was on the door handle. He didn't turn around. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Because I want to stay?" Todd took a breath, but Neil didn't hear how shaky it was. "Or because you want me to stay?"

Neil didn't understand why Todd had asked, but he still answered. "I want you to. I really do."

"Okay." Todd sat on Neil's bed this time.

"Okay."

"You can do work while I sit here."

"I don't want to do work."

"I know."

Neil turned in Charlie's desk chair, briefly wondering why he hadn't just stood up and joined Todd on his own bed. "You know?"

Todd nodded. "I know."

Neil nearly smiled. "So what do I want to do?"

"You want..." Todd looked around for a second and then back at Neil, "To come over here and tell me what rhymes with orange."

"I do?"

"You do."

Neil stood up and plopped down next to Todd on his bed. "Why do I want to do this?"

"Because it's impossible," Todd said, "And you like doing impossible things."

"Do I?"

"You do."

"Okay, God," Neil taunted. He glanced down at the bed sheets. Todd was fiddling with them, using that as an excuse not to look at Neil. Their shoulders were touching and it was something near electrifying and definitely overwhelming. Neil's eyes followed from Todd's hand all the way up his arm to the side of his face, where he could properly see Todd avoiding looking at him. He didn't like that Todd was refusing to look at him. He never liked when Todd refused to look at him. "What else?"

Todd's head snapped to the side, and his surprised widened eyes told

Neil that he definitely didn't realize he was being stared at. Todd repeated, "What else?"

"Yeah," Neil said, "What else do I like to do?"

For some reason, the very close eye contact was tense. "Do you really need me to tell you?"

Neil shrugged. "Sometimes I forget."

"You like reading."

"No I do not."

"Well, oops!" Todd threw his hands up in the air and then attempted to slide forward away from Neil and off his bed. "I'd better get going then. I'm not any help."

Neil grabbed his wrist and he stiffened entirely. "Door hinge."

Todd was confused for a second, but then looked over his shoulder. "Kind of."

"Sporange."

"Now what's that?"

"A rare type of mutated bacteria?"

Todd shook Neil's hand off of his wrist. "Rejected."

Neil sat up and pushed Todd down by his shoulder so he couldn't get up and try to run away, which Neil didn't understand why he was trying to do that anyway. Three minutes ago he seemed depressed almost leaving, and now he was trying to. "And what are you, the Oxford dictionary?"

"I could be."

"Not that I know of," Neil said and scooted forward so he was sitting next to Todd on the edge of the bed. "Why're you trying to run away?"

"I have something to do," Todd tried, "I just remembered."

Neil wasn't going to tell Todd that he definitely didn't believe him because he was a horrible liar, but he still didn't let Todd leave. He just simply shook his head and somehow that was enough for Todd to

give up on his escape plan and fall back on Neil's bed. Neil got him to update him on what had been happening in the past few months. Apparently Meeks and Pitts had tried to take up the hobby of painting and their clothes were getting more covered in paint by the day. Knox and Charlie were dancing circles around one another, and Todd said that Charlie had even tried to get Todd to fake date him to make Knox jealous. He had said no, and then two days later, Knox had asked him the same thing. Neil wondered if the two of them knew that they were doing this to one another, but he also wondered why Charlie was even bothering. The kid had said he didn't want a relationship, and Knox did. Neil didn't want Knox to give up on his wish for commitment and Charlie to give up on his wish to not commit just so they could kiss one another. And then Todd told him that Cameron was so annoying that Jeffery had started coming to *him* to complain about it.

By the end of the updates Neil had gotten him comfortable enough to start mindlessly fiddling with Neil's hand rather than his bedsheets, and wow, Todd was adorable playing with Neil's fingers in the middle of an exasperated rant about how Pitts and Meeks didn't even *know* which brush to use when they were doing different techniques. Neil had agreed that this was a crime against humanity for Todd's sake. Todd wasn't a painter, he was just really into people doing things the *right* way, and somehow he knew the right way to do nearly everything. He held his pen in the 'proper' position even though it gave him sores. Neil had bought him those protectors to put around the pen, which pens *already* had, and it had only helped for a little bit. Todd's finger skin had learned how to mold itself around the rubber. It didn't help that Todd wrote nearly every day all day, even right then Neil could see the irritated red sore on Todd's finger.

It was a nice twenty minutes, hearing about what his friends were up too, but it made Neil feel extremely disconnected. All of these things were happening right next to him and he hadn't even noticed. He had been kicking Charlie out of the room and insisting not to be bothered rather than knocking some sense into him. Knox had been there for him when Mira had called, and Neil couldn't even manage to slap some sense into him either? He was a horrible friends. He only realized he was lost in these thoughts when Todd was snapping in front of his face.

"Are you okay?" He asked, and unfortunately having to do this had caused him to notice how much he was touching Neil, so he stopped. Neil wanted to throw his hand back in his and tell him to play with his fingers to his heart's content, because at least it made Neil feel good for something. He started feeling self conscious about how he

had helped Sam. Sure, he'd been proud then, but that was back when he still thought he was a decent friend. What if he had subconsciously sabotaged Sam's plot and Avery was going to end up on the streets? Okay, long shot, but he could still be worried about it.

"I'm fine," Neil answered, and before Todd could argue he asked, "And what have you been up to?"

"Oh." Todd didn't say it in a way that he had just realized he'd been forgetting to talk about himself, but rather in disappointment that Neil had noticed. Clearly he didn't want to. "Nothing new."

"Writing poetry?" Neil teased.

Todd shoved him. "Shut up. I don't."

"You do."

"I don't."

"You're telling me anybody *but* poets worry about how barely anything rhymes with orange?"

"You're telling me normal people know what sporange is?"

"Ouch," Neil said, "I just wanna hear about it. You like doing it!"

"I don't."

"Todd."

"I *don't*."

"*Todd*."

"Neil."

"Okay, fine!" Neil held his hands up in defense and Todd crossed his arms, knowing that it definitely was not 'fine' and Neil was not done. "Just tell me what you were writing about that was orange."

Todd's eyes widened and his neck heated up. "Nothing. That was just a fun question. I wasn't writing about fruit."

"Of course not," Neil said, "The color, right? What about it?" Todd was silent, turning his head so Neil could not see the anxiety that was overtaking his face. "Come on!" He shook Todd's thigh. "What about

it?"

"Nothing."

"Halloween?" Neil started to guess, "Pumpkins? Fall?" Todd stiffened and Neil felt it under his hand. He smiled widely. "Fall! Is that it?"

"Yes," Todd grumbled and shoved Neil's hand off of him. "Now leave me alone."

"I love fall," Neil said, "Tell me about your poem." Todd was not engaging at all, so Neil pulled out the pleading tone. "Please?"

Unfortunately, Todd was actually really good at denying Neil of things he wanted. "Write your own poem if you love it so much."

"I wanna hear yours."

"Why?" Todd asked, "Why can't you just leave me alone?"

"Cause it's *yours*," Neil said and hopped over Todd so he could be within his line of sight again. Neil was weakening him. His face had softened at his last words and he wasn't turning away from Neil again. He was, however, pouting with crossed arms. Neil put his hand on his forearm and held it there until Todd made eye contact. "*Please."*

"Fine! Get offa' me!" Todd threw his arms apart and Neil fell back in gleeful surprise. Todd refused to acknowledge the stupid smile on his face, but Neil couldn't hold it back. His heart was too excited for him to *not* be smiling. "Promise not to judge me?"

"I promise," Neil said, getting more hyped.

"And to not try to interpret it?"

"Yeah," Neil bounced up and down, "It'll fall on deaf ears, promise."

"Okay." Todd sighed like he already regretted it and got off of Neil's bed. He went over to Neil's desk and opened the bottom drawer, pulling out the familiar journal that Neil always felt guilty upon seeing. He flipped through it, searching for the poem until he noticed that Neil was staring at him. "What? Your room is a good place to hide it. Of course I'll be changing that now." Neil had nothing to say for he felt so weirdly special that Todd was hiding this super important thing in his desk. Todd finally settled on a page and sat back down on the bed, with Neil giving him all of his attention, completely undivided.

Neil wouldn't have stopped looking at him if the building set on fire. And it really did fall on deaf ears, Neil barely heard the words Todd was saying. He was way too focused on the underlying passion in Todd's voice. He was trying to hide it from Neil, but Neil could always see through his facades. Todd loved poetry, Neil knew that, but Neil found out that he liked seeing it on Todd's face a bit more. A lot more, actually. It was rare that Todd actually enjoyed what he was doing. He got really into reading sometimes, but he was always too immersed in the book to actually appreciate it. He did cute little things like lick his lips or furrow his eyebrows, but you could never really see how he felt about reading on his face.

Poetry was different. It was so, so different. Neil couldn't even tell you what language Todd was speaking he was way too focused on the other boy's face. His bangs falling over his eyes and him nervously pushing them away. The pursing of his lips when he stuttered or mispronounced a word. The passionate spark in his eyes. The one that told Neil that Todd was really enjoying himself. That he was doing what he wanted to do. The same spark he'd seen in Mira's eyes during that one scene that fateful summer.

Wait.

Neil focused on the twinkle in Todd's eye and the anxious flutter of his eyelashes at his increased blinking. Being smitten with Todd was basically Neil's default expression at that point, so when he felt it shift to something even more, he could've screamed. He felt his own heart-eyes at Todd's poetry. At Todd.

Because finally, *finally* he had a crush on him.

At the snap of God's finger, a flick of the tongue...

He was in love with Todd Anderson.

Chapter End Notes

> i have had so much going on with school and work and everything, but i have finally got this for you. i hope it was worth the wait. <3 i love u all stay safe

End of Eighth—Autumn by Todd Anderson

Chapter Summary

Todd wrote a poem.

Chapter Notes

i dont think theres any warnings for this chapter omg

but this is kind of a short one i did not realize how short it was im sorry

also didnt edit it just typed it and threw it up for you guys so i hope its good :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Autumn is bare

And full of taboos

But I am aware

I have nothing to lose

Todd hadn't *not* thought that eighth grade was going to go well, it just wasn't the top on the list of possibilities for that year. He was a little more hopeful, maybe, but he promised himself to never let that happen again once he found out that Jeffery was going to be his babysitter all year. Seriously, Todd didn't know what evil, petty tirade his brother was on, but he seemed set on ruining Todd's life. It wasn't that Neil couldn't spend the night in his dorm anymore, Todd didn't care about that at all. If anything, it kind of made him feel better after the whole Neil-trying-to-kiss-him thing. It was just the fact that there was literally no more trust in him within the family. Aunt Ness thought he was a traitor and his parents thought he was a homosexual rogue, and Jeffery sure wasn't helping.

It also looped Knox into something that Jeffery had no business looping him into. Knox went to sleep early—well on the nights he wasn't off with Charlie, and Jeffery always woke him up busting in to the room and flicking on the lights just to make sure Todd wasn't engaging in sin. Ridiculous couldn't even begin to describe the little routine the three of them fell into. Knox made it a mission for *him* to

be doing something progressively weirder every time Jeffery came in. Todd would be reading or doing homework, and Knox would be doing yoga or juggling balled, dirty socks. In short, Todd loved his stupid roommate, but it still didn't make up for the anger at his family.

At least Neil felt the same, even though Todd hated how protective he could be sometimes. Without supervision, Neil would probably kill Todd's whole family before thinking twice. And, I mean, Todd didn't *hate* it. He felt special that Neil cared that much about him. That Neil would do that kind of thing for him. But then he felt undeserving and like a burden and it was his whole usual cycle. He wasn't worth Neil's care or Neil's unchecked loyalty, but he liked the thought that maybe he could be. He liked that Neil climbed into his bed in the mornings when there was nothing else to do and he liked that it helped him sleep. He liked feeling Neil's fingers in his hair and Neil's body next to his.

I should keep from October

And its orange color schemes

Should keep to the hers

And away from the gleam

But all that continuously went down the drain when Neil was always saying *we're both still not gay, right?* Because, no, Todd was gay. Todd was very, *very* gay, and Neil constantly made him into a liar. Constantly made him sneak out of his own bed in the morning and avert his eyes to pretend he didn't notice he was being stared at. He felt like he was violating Neil because Neil didn't know that when he stared at Todd it made his whole heart go numb. Neil didn't know why Todd stiffened when they touched, but Todd did. He knew why, and it felt like a crime. It felt like assault, harassment, the tainting of perfect, little, straight Neil Perry—

So imagine how pissed off Todd was at Ginny Danbury's birthday party.

The concept of Ginny made him extremely nervous at first. She was the next Mira in Todd's poor brain. He'd have to watch Neil be with someone else all over again, but after continuous talks with Charlie, he didn't feel that way anymore. Charlie was always a very convincing person, but when he said that Neil was way too focused on *somebody else* to even think about Ginny, she wasn't one of his worries anymore. He thought she sounded good for Neil, in fact. Neil said that she was

helpful, like a female version of Charlie, and even if Charlie was so fucking annoying sometimes, he was the best therapist friendship could buy. Todd didn't know what he would do without him. Charlie was basically *Neil Perry weekly.* He gave Todd all the details of what was going on in Neil's head, which sounds bad, but you have to remember that usually Todd already knew all of this, it was *Neil* who was making himself difficult to be around. Todd couldn't stay around him if he was going to keep waking up next to him in the mornings. He was thirteen with very poor self control.

At first he was excited for Ginny's birthday party, but then he got into the car, was shoved in the middle right next to Neil, and forced to think about how close they were and how they hadn't been that close in a *very, very* long time. Not to mention that the air was already filled with the hormones and neediness that Charlie and Knox were leaking into the air, so Todd was in a *state* of sorts, alright? You can't blame him for anything he thought, said, or did in that time, okay? He firmly thought that even a straight guy would pop a boner at seeing Neil Perry in a wet, white shirt, and that's just something you can't argue with, but it was still something that made Todd jealous. Seeing Knox and Charlie look at Neil like he was free game made Todd's blood boil because Neil was unequivocally his. He was sure Charlie wouldn't appreciate it if Todd started spewing stories about how Knox had gotten off to *him* in the darkness, which hadn't happened, so Todd couldn't say that anyway, but still.

There's jealousy and pain

And reminders of hell

Cause with Autumn comes rain

And like leaves, I fell

Not only did Todd find out that Neil did actually like guys—that he liked guys and still didn't like Todd—he found out through Charlie, and because Charlie was so prideful in light of what happened the final night of sixth grade. Todd could have snapped his neck. If not for the final, sudden revelation brought out in the middle of his and Neil's... altercation... Todd would have most definitely killed Charlie Dalton. Firstly, for bringing up what happened when Todd was caught in the unfortunate situation of kissing him and secondly, for bragging about Neil like he didn't know Todd was deathly in love with him. Oh, *wait,* thirdly for ruining the moment Todd finally got the confidence to ask Neil if he liked him. You don't just jack off to someone no

emotion, okay? Or at least Todd didn't. He wasn't sure about anyone else anymore. Because seriously out of everyone Neil had done it to Charlie. Charles Dalton? After all that had happened between Neil and *him*? Todd wished it was a joke, but it wasn't.

And little did he know, he got Neil back by talking with Sam and barely paying him any mind for the rest of the night. Also, he was the one sharing a bed with Neil that night, so that was truly all that mattered to him. However, Neil seemed so distant for the rest of the weekend, sneaking off with Ginny and Charlie for minutes at time to whisper in corners about something or other. Todd didn't mind, though, because Neil looked happy most of the time. Fighting with Charlie or talking with Chris, especially dancing around with Ginny at the party portion of the weekend. Todd watched from afar with Pitts and Meeks bickering about the Danbury's garden boxes behind him because the three of them really didn't feel like getting into the party at the moment. While Todd was sitting there, another ladybug crawled onto the crinkle of his jeans near the knee and sat there for as long as Todd was sitting down. Ladybugs represented luck, Todd knew that, but he also knew they represented love.

He asked that ladybug if he should keep loving Neil, and the ladybug flew up to his face and landed on his cheek. Todd took that as a yes. He wouldn't have taken it as anything else.

I fell rather hard

Missed the slow breeze

My heart was left scarred

By the view of dead trees

Back at school, things went back to normal. You know, the cat-and-mouse game Neil and Todd played, normal, except Todd knew he was in for it. A twelve year old didn't know what love was. Sure, maybe Todd sat in front of mirrors and swore on his heart, hoped to die that he'd be dedicated to Neil for the rest of his life, but he was still twelve. He hadn't even hit puberty. But fourteen, that was a real kind of age where you could start genuinely falling in love. Feeling it through your bones and your blood, it was basically like another limb for Todd. Another function of his body. Any time he could, he thought of Neil, stared at Neil, wrote poems about Neil, came up with ways to make Neil happy, to make Neil laugh—anything. His brain was always *Neil, Neil, Neil.*

So. imagine once again, his panic when Neil took a sudden interest in Todd's poetry. The poetry about *him*, and imagine Todd's sadness when Neil thought the reason he wouldn't share was because he didn't trust Neil, which he didn't. He didn't trust Neil not to hurt himself or not to smoke just to feel the burn in his throat, but he would trust Neil with anything else, and apparently Neil didn't understand that. But even if it broke his heart, Todd was not about to out himself. Not yet. Maybe one day he would tell Neil absolutely everything he felt about him, but it wasn't going to be then. Not when Neil was in a down mood. Todd didn't want to confess to him just to make him happy. He wanted a moment. He swore to himself that he would know when that moment would be, but Charlie said it was just an excuse to never tell Neil how he felt, which was equally as likely to be true, so Todd couldn't exactly disagree, but he knew. There would be a moment perfect enough in the universe where everything would calm down, he could stare into Neil's eyes, and not have to lie to him anymore, but it wasn't then.

If Todd had seen how Neil had been looking at him when he *actually* decided to share his poem, that would've been it. Because Todd wasn't an oblivious idiot like his stupid best friend. He didn't like when Neil gave him *the look* because he knew what that look was and he wouldn't allow himself to even think he was worthy of it, but little did he know, the look had graduated from mildly concerning to world changing. Little did he know that Neil was looking at him exactly how he looked at Neil. He was barely in the present the very moment that his life changed. He was way too concerned about hiding his own feelings to notice the ones that had been put right out on display. That would've allowed him to see everything clearly for the rest of the year. To really understand every lingering touch, word, or look, but he was out of the loop. He lacked the context, so maybe he was an oblivious idiot like his stupid best friend.

But I could care less

I love Autumn just as

I'm entwined with this mess

And what this mess has

Chapter End Notes

i wanted to wrap up eighth grade and then probably get myself on a schedule for the juicy high school chapters because no way

im getting through that without scheduling it or something.

stay seated guys, i really appreciate your patience i hope the chaps make the waiting worth it :)

Freshman Year—Honey

Chapter Summary

Neil's first day of high school.

Chapter Notes

no content warnings i dont think????

life has been crazy my loves so i hope this is good for yall <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil's throat felt tight, and it wasn't the tie. It couldn't have been the tie. He'd been practicing wearing that stupid tie for two years, so he *knew* it wasn't the tie. But he hated thinking about what it actually was. He should've been excited to start his high school career. The first step on his staircase to becoming a doctor. But he felt less like he was at the start of the staircase and more like he was in the basement. A dark, dusty, dingy old basement... that was also locked. Charlie's descriptions of summer truly were the real four pillars of Welton: *Travesty, Horror, Decadence, Excrement.* At least that's what the boys recited in attempt to make one another feel better. It hardly worked. Neil didn't even remember how to breathe, and unfortunately seven-year-old bathroom humor wasn't really going to help him remember.

Something was wrong with him. He knew what it was. He just didn't want to admit it.

He didn't want to admit that Todd Anderson was the reason his Freshman year was going to be so difficult. Todd was supposed to be the one thing that made him everything but stressed. He used to look at Todd and sigh in relief, but now when he looked at Todd, he didn't know what relief even felt like. All he felt was too much admiration to even conjure a different train of thought. He couldn't focus. Not at all. Not when Todd was there. He probably wouldn't even be able to solve basic math problems if you asked him to. Two plus two was Todd Anderson. That's the state his brain was in. How could he have never liked Todd before three months ago? How had he known how to *act* when he didn't like Todd? He should've written himself a manual while he was still in his crisis. It would've been really helpful right then. Because right then Neil couldn't think, breathe, do math—anything—because Charlie wasn't his roommate anymore. He knew it

was going to happen, but not once did he ever expect Mr. Nolan or Todd's parents or *his* parents to let him and Todd stay in the same room together.

Him and Todd, spending as much time together as Neil used to spend with Charlie. Would he get sick of Todd? No way. But Todd would certainly get sick of him. Neil barely cared when he thought about spending each and every night with him. Sharing secrets within the comfort of their shared walls and making out in the dark under the sheets.

Alright, maybe not that last bit, but can you blame Neil's brain for going there? He was fourteen, hadn't been kissed in two years, and living with his *incredibly* attractive roommate whose lips were rose-colored and able to speak poetry like free-falling pollen. Neil was a bumblebee if nothing else. Pollen was what he lived for—strived for. Him and Todd could make honey... which sounded *so, so* gross to anyone but Neil, but Neil thought it sounded perfect.

It broke Neil's heart that Todd seemed fidgety and nervous to be sharing a room with him, but at the same time he got it. Todd didn't like change. He didn't like that his only true constant throughout his last few years, Knox, was going to be ripped out from under him, and Neil could understand that. As much as he had wanted to get rid of Charlie, he didn't know if he was ready to get used to a school year without him. Even with that, he was ready to spend every last second with Todd. Well, he thought that he was, but evidently he was not. He was shaking, and if Charlie hadn't thrown him back when he tried to follow him and Knox out of the room, he would've left Todd behind in there and probably never came back.

But Charlie Dalton was the opposite of a cock block.

Neil regretted telling Charlie anything, but as always with Charlie, it was hard to *not* tell him. Of course, Charlie knew a couple of things that Neil didn't, so he was trying extra hard to get his friends to stop being wimps, but Neil just saw this as annoying persistence, and was at his wits end with his ex-roommate. He couldn't exactly explain why he was so mad at Charlie when Todd asked, so instead, he just went over to the radiator, sat up on it, and lit a cigarette. Maybe if he didn't look at Todd, everything would be better.

Todd had the same idea, staring straight down at his desk while unloading an unbelievable amount of items from his bag. Surprisingly, he was the first to speak. "I got my astronomy class."

Neil looked up and over to him, seeing the remnants of gel in the back of his hair. It was slick, but not *slicked back.* If it had been, Neil would've been on top of him already. He seriously lacked self-control, but he was also insanely self-conscious, and that was the only thing keeping him something close to sane. He looked back out the window. "Really? Your dad let you?"

"Not technically," Todd muttered and pushed a pencil on his desk until it was straight. "He didn't know what he was signing."

"Espionage," Neil said, "Wonder what us two are going to get up to this year." That sentence was laced with double-meaning. Neil would as quickly dump a bucket of ice-cold water on Hager's head with Todd as he would shove Todd into a closet and kiss him. There must've been something in Neil's tone that gave away what he actually meant, because Todd coughed and shifted so he was even further away. Neil took a breath so he could calm down, and then stared at the back of Todd's head again. Even the back of his head was pretty.

Todd turned over a notebook in his hands. "You're staring."

Neil blinked. "Huh?"

"You're staring," Todd repeated, "I can feel it."

"Sorry," Neil muttered and looked out the window again. "I was zoning out." He brought the cigarette up to his mouth, but then Todd was right next to him, and he was too out of breath from shock to take a drag.

Todd held his hand out. "Gimme."

Neil actually scoffed. "Fat chance."

"So what?" Todd asked, "Everyone but me can smoke?" Since last year, Pitts and Knox had taken up smoking too. Meeks was still opting out and Charlie would kill a man before letting anyone put one of his cigarettes near Cameron's mouth. Todd tried to swipe the cigarette out of Neil's hand while he was thinking, but Neil pulled back just in time.

"Yeah, exactly," He said.

Todd stood his ground and glared at his friend. "Give me it."

Neil leaned forward toward his face. "It's not happening."

"Bull*shit* it's not," Todd said, and then he grabbed the cigarette and ran across the room to smoke it. Neil tried his best to catch up before Todd actually got it in his mouth, but he was like a mouse. Neil could not catch him if he tried. Also, he was simply just distracted because, while everything Todd did was somehow extremely attractive, there were certain things he did that made Neil forget how to move. Apparently him smoking was one of them. "Can I help you with something?" Todd said it with his usual level of sass, but there was a nervous shakiness to it. Neil could hear it.

"Give it back."

Todd smiled shortly and puffed smoke right in Neil's face. "Good enough?"

"That's it." Neil grabbed Todd's collar and pulled him away from the wall he had decided to lean against. He tackled him to the ground and tried to wrestle the cigarette back out of his hands, but Todd was putting up too good of a fight, which was surprising from someone who could barely throw a punch. No one tried to fight Todd, not even Neil most of the time, but somehow Todd still knew that if you bent Neil's elbow back he would get on his knees and start begging for forgiveness. And that was exactly what happened. "Todd, Todd, Todd, stop, stop, stop."

"Fat chance," Todd mocked.

"Do you want to die in your sleep?" Neil asked, but then Todd put more pressure on his elbow and he winced. "I mean, would you like me to sing you a lullaby, Sir Anderson?"

Todd laughed and threw Neil's arm back at him, landing on the ground and bringing the cigarette back to his lips. "Gross."

"Problem?" Neil cocked an eyebrow.

"You." Todd tapped the end of the cigarette and ashes went falling to the floor. "You're the problem."

"Oh yeah? How's that?"

"You tackle me to the ground and you wanna know how that is?"

Neil hopped up off the ground. "Fair enough." He extended a hand to Todd, who reluctantly took it and stood up himself. For a split second, Neil thought maybe Todd wouldn't let go of him, but then he was

pulling away quick enough that Neil knew that was never even a possibility. He scratched the back of his neck and turned back toward Todd's desk, letting his eyes drift over everything that Todd had already put out on his side of the room. His multiple sets of school supplies, his stack of books—Neil couldn't believe he was living with Todd and seeing how domestic he was. Even right then he was trying to sweep the cigarette ashes off of the floor and out of view. Neil thought he was adorable.

"Study group tonight?" Todd asked without looking at Neil.

A 'yes' was on the tip of Neil's tongue, but he held it back, instead responding, "No."

Todd looked over his shoulder. "Pardon?"

"No," Neil repeated, "They can. Knox and Charlie and them, I mean, but we should stay in. Read a book or something."

Todd straightened up. "Really?"

"Yeah," Neil said, "What's so shocking about that?"

"Nothing, I guess," Todd replied, "What do you want to read?"

Whatever makes you fall asleep on my bed tonight, Neil thought. He didn't like that he was basically trying to manipulate Todd into giving him affection, but if he thought he craved it from him before, now was even worse. He liked the kid with his whole heart for God's sake. He would've traded his mother for a hug from Todd Anderson. And reading made Todd so *happy* and his eyes lit up and if Neil had the chance to make that happen he wasn't going to not use it. Thankfully, Todd agreed to this alone time and Neil was able to calm himself down for the first time that day. Maybe that year would be alright. Nothing with Todd wasn't alright, so everything would be okay.

"Neil?"

Neil snapped out of his daydreams again. "Yeah?"

"You're okay, right?"

"O—Okay?" Neil echoed, "Yeah. Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

"No reason," Todd said, "I just like to make sure."

"Thanks," Neil said, but Todd didn't respond. Neil did a quick check of

him, making sure nothing was off. He knew Todd too well, if he even stood the wrong way Neil would know that something was wrong. Unfortunately, Neil was a lot worse at telling *what* was wrong. There was something. He could tell. But he could also tell it wasn't something Todd would open up about if he asked, so he reluctantly didn't bother. Instead he ran over and grabbed the book that he had just noticed was laying on Todd's pillow. Todd had no time to stop him. "Wanna read this one?"

"Sure," Todd said, grabbing the book from Neil's hands and flipping through the pages. "I've already started, though."

Neil jumped on Todd's bed. "Then catch me up."

Todd nervously glanced at the boy on his bed, whacking the cover of his book against the palm of his hand. He bit his lip. "Well, it's important you read it. Here." He handed the book back and Neil grabbed it with a confused look on his face. "I think I'll actually go to the study group tonight. Read up to chapter five."

Todd tried to turn around and leave the room, but Neil hopped back up off the bed and chased after him. "Wait, wait, wait, you're gonna leave me?"

Todd's lip was still in between his teeth. His foot was tapping on the ground. "Not technically. You can come."

"Oh."

"What?"

Neil looked at the ground. "I was just thinking we could hang out tonight. You know, just us."

Todd refused to make eye-contact, which was a good thing because Neil did too. "You were?"

Neil heard something in his tone. He had no idea what it was that he was hearing, but it made him bite the inside of his cheek, take everything back, and tell Todd that was just a bad joke and he should go to the study group if he wanted to. Surprisingly, Todd didn't question this behavior and did, indeed, leave Neil alone in the room to fall onto his bed with the book in his hand. The Great Gatsby. Who knew what it was about. Not Neil. He didn't give a shit. He just thought it would make Todd stay and hang out with him. Not that he *needed* an excuse. He could go hang out with Todd right now and

everything would probably be fine, but he just couldn't do it. For some reason, it seemed nearly impossible to ask Todd to spend time with him. What if he gave himself away? He couldn't weird Todd out. He couldn't lose him.

So instead of eventually joining his friends in the common room, he sat in the dark and read the first five chapters of The Great Gatsby.

-

That night wasn't any easier. Neil opted to go change in the bathroom even though he could've as easily done it in his dorm. By the time he got back, Todd was already out somewhere else, brushing his teeth or something, so Neil just climbed into bed and tried to go to sleep. The light was still on, and he could never fall asleep with the light still on, but he wasn't going to turn it off. Then Todd would have to turn it on when he came back in, and that would probably disturb Neil more than just falling asleep with it on in the first place. Not that it mattered. He didn't go to sleep. He certainly tried. He closed his eyes and curled up toward the wall, but it didn't work. He was wide awake by the time Todd came back in.

Todd did, in fact, turn off the light, but instead of walking over to his own bed, he walked to Neil's. Neil could hear his steps on the creaky floorboards, and with each creak his breathing got a little faster. He felt a poke on his back. "Neil?" He pretended to sleepily shift, hoping Todd would give up and walk away, but he didn't. He felt himself being poked again. "... Neil?" Continuing the ruse, Neil pretended to grunt and roll over, shoving his face into his pillow, but Todd must've needed something important because he grabbed Neil's shoulder and shook it, whisper-yelling, "Neil!"

"What?" Neil asked, not turning around, being afraid that Todd would be able to tell he totally hadn't been asleep if he did. He pretended to take in his dark surroundings, which wasn't too hard. This was a new room in the darkness, after all. "Shouldn't you be in bed?"

"It's barely past lights out."

Neil inwardly cringed. "Is it?"

"Yeah," Todd said, "And, I don't know, I thought we could read? If you caught up, I mean."

Then suddenly Neil was alert and his worries about being discovered were thrown out the window long enough for him to shoot into a

sitting-up position. "Really?"

Todd nodded and held up the copy of the book that he must've went and grabbed at some point. "Did you read?"

"Yeah, yeah I did," Neil said, rushed, then he scooted over and patted the bed next to him, urging Todd to sit down. Todd sat down, but not before pulling the bed sheets back and sliding into them. Neil wanted to know what in the world he thought he was doing. What he was doing was normal—their normal, anyway. Sure, they hadn't done it in a while, but it wasn't the strangest thing to be climbing into one another's beds to read. But it hadn't happened while Neil liked him. Sharing a blanket this close to each other? No way. Way too intimate. Way too... hot. Literally, but also in reference to the dark alleyway of thoughts that Neil's mind decided to trek down. Of course, Neil didn't know this, but Todd felt the same way. However, Todd was way better at hiding it. He'd gotten used to it. Neil was nowhere near that. He swallowed. "How long until we go to bed?"

"How long do you want?" Todd asked.

"I don't care," Neil answered too quickly, biting his tongue in regret.

But Todd didn't seem to notice. "Yeah, me neither."

"Really?"

"What is up with you?" Todd asked, scooting away so he could appropriately give Neil a bewildered look.

"What do you mean?" Neil asked, and Todd had to pull the blanket back up because Neil's nervously bouncing knee was causing it to fall down. Todd shrugged, and apparently that was supposed to be cue for Neil to talk again. "Seriously, Todd, I don't know what you're talking about. What's up with *you*?"

"Nothing that hasn't been up with me for the past two years."

"What does *that* mean?"

"Doesn't matter," Todd dismissed, and his teeth were practically chattering despite his confident, arrogant tone. "I want to know what's wrong with *you*. Because it's something."

"It's nothing."

"You're acting weird."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

"No, I'm not!"

Todd covered Neil's mouth because he was really good at forgetting how to control his volume in the middle of a conversation. He gave Neil a look before taking his hand back. "Defensive, much?"

"Never mind this," Neil shoved himself away from Todd and closer to the wall, even though his head and heart were telling him to just stop moving and make up some sort of lie to tell Todd so they could stay as they were. "I'm just gonna go to bed."

Todd narrowed his eyes. "No."

Neil looked at him. "Sorry?"

"You're not," Todd said, "We're going to read because you wanted to."

"Not if you're going to be so annoying."

"Well, I'm sorry that *you're* being a complete weirdo, and it's pissing *me* off."

"I'm—" Neil took a breath, realizing that any more objection would just make him look childish, so instead he did the much more adult thing of pouting, crossing his arms, and sinking into his bed and against his pillows. Todd treated him like a toddler, giving him a pat on the head and clearing his throat to begin to read. Neil's annoyance faded away as Todd began, being replaced rather quickly with resisted temptations to cuddle into Todd's side or grab Todd's hand and put it on his head so he would start playing with his hair. Usually, Todd did it absentmindedly and it took a well-thought out scheme for Neil to get him distracted enough to become absent-minded, but in his infatuated state, he was in no place to be conducting well-thought out schemes.

Therefore, Neil couldn't trust himself to fall asleep before Todd did because he knew his subconscious would do whatever it wanted when it had full control over his body. He just had to hope for the best, which is what he started doing when he knew he couldn't stay up anymore. His eyes were drooping and Todd's voice was so comforting

that he couldn't help it. Before he knew it, he was on the brink of being asleep and being awake.

And he could've swore, right before he slipped into unconsciousness, he felt Todd's fingers swirling in his hair.

Chapter End Notes

i know you all have been excited for high school anderperry so i hope this meets your expectations

ALSO each high school year is going to be TEN chapters each whereas every other year has been eight. so they might vary in length, but i am really liking putting out longer chapters considering the gaps between updates.

and to those who have binged the entire book recently. i appreciate you so much. i see every comment and while i only reply to some, i internalize and think about every single one. i love you all <3

Freshman Year—Locksley Hall

Chapter Summary

> The boys have a new English teacher, and Neil isn't taking high school very well.

Chapter Notes

> CW// mentions of breakdowns and anger issues, lashing out, angst, academic stress
>
> TW// mentions of previous self-harm, self-harm scars

See the end of the chapter for more notes

High School was hard. Not that Neil didn't think it wasn't going to be, it was just much worse than he'd prepared himself for. It had only been a week and a half and Neil was ready to drop out. His father took High School a hell of a lot more seriously than he had taken middle school, and considering how seriously he'd already been taking all of Neil's education thus far—it was horrible. Weekly calls, weekly grade checks, absolutely no tolerance for rough housing or demerits. Neil ended up going to every study group they organized just so he could see his friends and socialize. It was either do that or talk to his friends in the showers, and he wasn't really comfortable with the latter. Not since Ginny's birthday party, at least.

There was one good thing, though. Welton had a new English teacher.

Now, Neil had absolutely no clue what made the old English teacher finally quit, and he *sure* didn't suspect it had something to do with the years of pranks he'd suffered at the hands of Charlie and Neil. So whatever it was—whatever divine intervention that had done it—Neil was happy to have him out of there. However, he did know that Welton would probably just get a sample of the old man's DNA and clone him down in the basement or something, so he didn't exactly get his hopes up.

Which is why he was surprised when he saw a younger man sitting among all the teachers at the first day assembly. It had kind of slipped his mind because he didn't really give a crap about it the first day. He had much more important things to worry about, but when Charlie and Knox had brought it back up, his curiosity was piqued. Charlie had an idea of doing some sort of information heist, but Neil shot it

down. He couldn't get into trouble, and he had to keep them out of it too. His father wouldn't let him have friends anymore if they acted like delinquents, and Neil had to let that be the one thing his father couldn't take from him: his friends. After a bit of explaining, Charlie accepted this. Neil knew this hardly meant anything—that Charlie wasn't about to undergo a total personality change—but he hoped he'd be in the clear for at least a little while.

Anyway, this isn't about Charlie. It's about the new English teacher. Neil had his first class with him, and made the decision and observation of—*what in God's name?*

It wasn't exactly the happiest atmosphere in any of their classes, and Neil had always hardly even felt like a person while he was in class. More like a vessel that made the teachers feel like they weren't just lecturing in an empty room. But in *this* English class, he felt like he was part of it. Of course, it was kind of vicious the way it had happened. All that he had done was answer a question he had been asked about Charlie.

The teacher pointed at Charlie's usual seat in the back of the room. "Mr. Dalton, what's your name?"

Charlie raised an eyebrow, asking with the expression if that was a serious question. The teacher stood his ground, so Charlie said, "Mr. Dalton?"

"No, wrong," The teacher said and rang a bell on his desk, "What's your name?"

"Charles?"

The teacher looked over his shoulder. "That what you call yourself?"

Charlie had no idea what was happening. "No. Charlie."

Then the man was standing right in front of Neil's desk with a pointed finger at his face. "Is this your friend?"

"Yes."

"Do you corroborate this story, Mr. Perry?" And that's when Neil realized that he was suddenly a part of this.

"Yes, sir."

"And, Mr. Perry, do you call him Charlie?"

"I do."

"Why?"

Neil was taken aback. "*Why?*" The teacher simply just nodded his head, prompting Neil to continue with an answer he most definitely didn't have. While Neil was beyond confused, he had the smallest smile on his face. Everyone was looking at him, but he didn't particularly care about that when he was about to insult his friend. "Because Charles is a stupid name."

"Not wrong," Charlie shrugged.

The teacher went from staring at Neil to staring back at Charlie in half a second. "You think that as well?"

"I do, indeed."

"Because he does? Or because you do?"

"Listen, I don't need anyone to tell me Charles is a stupid name. Charlie, however—" Charlie leaned back in his chair with his arms crossed. "—Charlie suits me."

"And who told you that?" It was never ending with these two. Neil could already predict a pattern for the year. Or at least he thought he could. He'd been wrong about this English teacher so far. Maybe he shouldn't have been making any more assumptions.

"My mommy," Charlie said, and then scoffed at his own tone, "No one. Me. I know me best."

"That you do." The teacher had a mildly pleased smile on his face as he went back up to the board and started doing things that actually involved English. Neil had turned around to give Charlie a look—a look which he was met with from Charlie too. Who was this guy? All over the room people were shifting their eyes uneasily at one another. Neil found Todd's, and he looked mortified. Of course he would be, especially if the new English teacher kept on a roll with his calling-on-random-people thing. Todd made it through the rest of the class without incident, but Meeks and Pitts were not left alone because of their unusual last names. The teacher insisted that if they don't want to be called by those, they had the power to change it, but neither of them wanted to. All they wanted was for the teacher to leave them

alone.

This teacher, of course, was Mr. John Keating.

Neil didn't know where he came from, but he vaguely remembered Nolan saying something about how Keating was a Welton graduate. He thought Keating may have repeated it himself, but that was before he became interesting and Neil was definitely focused more on Todd's side profile than his new teacher's backstory. So he went digging through the library, annual after annual. He went back a bit too far, overestimating Mr. Keating's age in a way that would've definitely offended him, but he eventually landed on the right issue. John Keating was an honors student, obviously, but there was one thing Neil got caught on. Something called The Dead Poet's Society. There was no other mention of it in the annual, so he brought it to his friends at dinner for a consensus. The seat next to Todd was taken, as well as every other seat, actually, so he squished himself next to Charlie, kind of sitting on top of him, and flipped the book onto the table.

"Look what I found." He pointed down to Keating's picture as all the boys leaned in to take a look. It wasn't anything surprising, but sometimes it was easy to forget that teachers had lives before teaching. Even harder when you're at a boarding school. Most teachers don't live at school, but these ones did. Neil often thought about how most of his teachers actually somehow have wives, and then he thought about *how*. He wouldn't marry any of them, that's for sure.

"What's the Dead Poet's Society?" Charlie asked, unnecessarily pushing Neil over. He was lucky he didn't have to sleep in the same room as him anymore. Neil's temper was a delicate, delicate thing lately. He was near a breaking point about all of the time.

"I don't know," Neil answered, "There's no other mention of it. I looked through the whole thing."

"We should ask," Charlie decided and shoved the book away.

"Really?" Cameron asked, "Shouldn't we just... stay out of it?"

"Stay out of *what?*" Charlie said exasperatedly. Forgot to mention, he hadn't been as lucky as Neil with his new roommate. He had gotten stuck with Richard Cameron. Neil didn't think they'd both make it to the end of the month alive. "This is public information. He's a weird guy. I doubt this is something he'll hide. Let's go find him."

"Charlie," Knox sighed, "Schoolwork?"

"And what?"

"We have tons," Neil said, angrily. Charlie's dismissal of the importance of academics was beginning to piss him off. Or maybe it wasn't Charlie's fault because *everything* had been pissing him off lately. This fact hadn't gone unnoticed. Most of his friends opted not to talk to him. There wasn't much they could say without sparking some sort of anger. Charlie backed off once Neil talked and slammed the book shut. Then, he decided not to sit down and eat with the rest of them, instead going to his room to calm down, hoping no one would follow him.

—

"Much is taken though much abides," Mr. Keating quoted carefully. He said every sentence slowly, like everyone needed to linger on each and every word. He looked around the room to be met with twenty blank stares, so he looked away and started pacing. "Alfred Lord Tennyson. Poetry isn't something we're going to focus on much on this year, but it is my favorite subject, so it'd be cruel to skip over it completely. What do we all think of poetry?" Mr. Keating sat down on his desk and gazed about the room, giving that warning stare teachers always did when they were about to call on someone. Meeks decided to be bold, take one for the team, and raise his hand.

"I think it's..." He lost his thought for a moment, but then got it back. "I think it's a different way of expressing emotion."

"Good, good."

"Am I right?"

"Mr. Meeks," Mr. Keating stood up, "There is no right."

Meeks did not speak whatever language Mr. Keating did. "What? Of course there is."

"Well then, do *you* think you're right?"

"I guess so."

"Someone else," Mr. Keating turned away dramatically, and when it was silent for a couple of moments he asked tauntingly, "Anyone else?" Neil saw the fateful turn of his body toward Todd, and right

before he could be singled out, Neil stepped up.

"I think poetry is important." *Important?* What does that even *mean*, Neil? Mr. Keating had the same question, so Neil had to come up with some bullshit to get through this. Todd looked at him thankfully, and that made him feel at least a little bit better. Putting himself on the spot like this also kind of made him want to burst into tears, but he didn't have time for that. Neil's stare lingered on the thankful brightness in Todd's eyes before he answered. "I think it's important when you're trying to understand someone." Even though Neil wasn't looking at him anymore, Todd turned away.

"That's right," Mr. Keating said, waiting for the betrayed gasp from Meeks before continuing, "I'm sorry, Mr. Meeks, but you're wrong."

"There is no wrong!" Meeks yelled.

"There's not?" Mr. Keating asked. Meeks was about to stand up at this point he was so mad, but Mr. Keating just looked vaguely entertained. He was more than likely enjoying this. "You said it yourself that there had to be a right, so there *has* to be a wrong."

"But—" Meeks cut himself off, knowing he was stuck in a corner.

"Mr. Meeks brings up an important lesson, boys," Mr. Keating said, starting to pace again and completely ignoring the inner turmoil he'd brought upon Meeks. "When comes one, comes the other, so sometimes things needn't not come at all."

"Much is taken though much abides," Charlie repeated in some sort of tone of understanding. Mr. Keating said nothing of this observation, but gave Charlie a long stare that Neil presumed was to tell him that he did good. Charlie couldn't hold in his giddy smile, but when he caught both Knox and Neil looking at him, he tried to turn it into a last-minute smirk—not that Knox or Neil were fooled by this ruse.

The rest of the class period was similar, and at the end the halls were again filled with discussion of Mr. Keating and his teaching methods. None of the boys had ever had a teacher like him before. Someone that gave them a voice and nearly taught them things that were actually important. Neil overheard someone say that they might actually try to pass English this year. He wanted to share the same excitement, and really he kind of did, but it was hard to demonstrate when he was buried in a pile of books trying to keep his grades up so he could afford to stay in soccer and the school annual and every other God forsaken thing he'd been signed up for, but he was getting

frustrated. It had been maybe two weeks or a month (he didn't really know), and he already felt like he was in prison. This feeling was supposed to reserved to the second semester. Not now. First semester was for fun and bonding and reunions, not Science and Algebra. He had no outlet either because everything he did was just another extension of this academic hellscape. He didn't particularly realize he had anger issues until he had been studying for two hours straight in the dark and felt a tap on his shoulder.

He whipped away the hand of the tapper and hissed, "What?"

"God." Todd's sassy voice. Neil felt regret start pooling in his stomach. He turned around to see Todd standing behind him for no real reason. "What's your problem?"

The building regret drained from his body immediately at this question. He forgot all about all of his morals and shot up from his chair. "What's my problem... what's my *problem!?* This"—He gestured to his avalanche of school work—"This is my problem! I can't—No one is letting me do this. Everyone is bothering me, and if I don't do this, I may as well just be dead." After it came out of his mouth, Neil knew it was a mistake, but he was in no place to try to process what he had just said. All he knew was that he wanted Todd to run away from him because he didn't deserve to be in this situation. Todd didn't even take a step toward the door, however, only holding a look of betrayal on his face. Neil's previous regret started coming back. "I'm sorry, Todd. I didn't mean it."

"Two and a half weeks, Neil," Todd said with a throat strained from stress, "Two and a half weeks of high school and you're already—" Todd cut himself off and took a breath. "Would you just take a break?"

"I can't," Neil said helplessly, "I have these math problems due tomorrow and that science quiz—"

"Please, Neil," Todd begged, and Neil caught his eyes glancing over previous patches of irritated skin. The skin that Neil had tore up himself just to bleed. Neil pulled down the sleeves to his sweater. "Neil?"

"It's true." Neil was crying. Why was he crying? He had been fine two weeks ago. How had he gone from simply worrying about living with the boy he liked to being on the brink of a massive breakdown? And when had he lost his ability to hide these things? He was supposed to be able to hide these things. If all his thoughts were this obvious all of

the time, Todd would never let him be in a room alone again.

"What is?" Todd asked, worried.

"If I fail this..." Neil started, "I may as well be dead. My father will be mad at me. I won't get into any schools. I won't be able to do anything."

"And you think that means I'll let you die?" Todd burst out, and Neil knew he was serious because he didn't immediately blush. When Todd didn't quickly take back whatever he had said and replace it with something else, that meant that Neil was dealing with the real, unfiltered Todd, and he would do anything the real, unfiltered Todd wanted. "So what you don't study for a quiz you know you're going to ace? And what's your math problem? Two plus two? Come on, Neil. You can't—" Todd took another breath, and he was lucky his example had been two plus two because just that was causing Neil to slide slowly back into his lovesick state. Two plus two equals Todd Anderson. Todd rubbed his hand over his mouth. "You can't leave me because of a bad grade."

"I wouldn't leave you," Neil tried, but Todd wasn't having it.

"Yes, you would!" He insisted, "Neil, I want to believe that you like being alive so bad, but sometimes I just can't. Not when you're like this. Not when you're not thinking about the future."

"What future?" Neil scoffed in disbelief even if Todd *was* sort of making sense. Neil liked being alive, he thought. Well, he *tried* to like being alive, but apparently that wasn't enough for Todd anymore.

"Would you be totally mad at me if I quoted Alfred Lord Tennyson right now?"

God, Neil liked this kid so much. "Not at all."

Todd went over and sat on his bed, and somehow Neil just knew that he was supposed to sit next to him, so he did. Once they were situated, meaning once Todd had put an unnecessary distance between him and Neil, he went on trying to quote his poetry, but it stopped dead in his throat. For a moment there was just silence until Todd pulled a thin sheet of paper from his own desk and just slid it over to Neil with an unrecognizable expression. Neil picked it up and read the excerpt.

When I dipt into the future far as human eye could see;

Saw the Vision of the world and all the wonder that would be—

In the Spring a fuller crimson comes upon the robin's breast;

In the Spring the wanton lapwing gets himself another quest;

Neil finished it and tapped on the paper with his knuckle, remembering something. "*In Spring a livelier iris changes on the burnish'd dove...*"

"You know that one?" Todd asked, tentatively taking his paper back.

"I guess Keating gave us excerpts from the same poem," Neil said, "Locksley Hall. He likes his Alfred Lord Tennyson. I think I do too."

Todd looked at the ground and let out a pathetic little laugh. "You worry me so much I think I'm the one who's gonna die."

"Not if I have anything to say about it," Neil shot back quickly, and then it suddenly hit him how much Todd really did worry about him all the time. Glasses of water would appear next to his notebooks after long nights of studying. His uniform was always washed even if he didn't remember putting it in the laundry. He always woke up in the mornings with a pleasant sensation in his hair. That was all Todd, he realized. "I'm sorry, Todd. I need to stop doing this to you."

"But I don't want you to do it for me," Todd said, "I want you to do it for *you*. I care about you. I'm a temporary thing. I can't be your inspiration."

"You are not temporary," Neil said in a tone that implied Todd had just called his mother a cow. "You are forever. *We* are forever." Neil barely knew what he was saying anymore because did he ever when he was talking to Todd?

Todd looked up at him. "We?"

"Yeah," Neil said, "I can't live without you."

"You—I—" Todd stuttered over and over again and it was this that snapped Neil back into it and made him realize what he was saying. Maybe he could basically profess his love for Todd when they were eleven and in fifth grade, but at fourteen it was definitely a little more serious. He suggested Todd go have fun, trying to brush off his own comments while also reassuring Todd that he would be fine if he left him alone. He wouldn't do anymore work, he swore, and Todd seemed

so awkward that he suddenly believed this and sent himself off to find Knox or Charlie or anybody that wasn't Neil. Neil, of course, opened up his Science book the second Todd was gone, but he couldn't comprehend the words with all that was on his mind, so he reached to his English text book and pulled out the excerpt that Keating had given *him*, reading past what he had recited and reading aloud.

"In the Spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love."

This future Todd was talking about—Neil didn't really care for it. That is, unless it was possible he could love Todd in that future. In that case, he was all in.

Chapter End Notes

hi babies i dont rlly like this chapter but we have eight more in freshman year after this one so WHATEVER i have time. love u all <3 hope u r all staying safe and healthy

Freshman Year—Piano Man

Chapter Summary

> In the midst of trying to get Todd to go to a Halloween party, it becomes apparent to Neil and everyone around him that he's been acting different.

Chapter Notes

> HI IM SO SORRY THIS HAS TAKEN SO LONG IVE JUST BEEN LACKING INSPIRATION AND THEN A HEADCANON I SAW ON TUMBLR RANDOMLY PROPELLED ME INTO STARTING THIS CHAPTER AND SOMETHING ABOUT TODAY HELPED ME FINISH IT
>
> ILL EDIT IT LATER YOU GUYS CAN HAVE IT NOW SORRY IF ITS BAD AND DOESNT MAKE SENSE I TRIED TO MAKE IT LONGER TO MAKE UP FOR YOUR WAITING

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil was classically trained in the piano. His mother had taught him, and that was the only reason he tolerated it. If the only way his mom was going to give him affection was through teaching him how to play an instrument, he would take it. He started when he was seven, and he was really desperate for his mother's love then. As he got better, though, his mom stopped teaching him. His father insisted he get an actual teacher, so he did, and suddenly piano wasn't so fun anymore. He eventually stopped when he got sent to Welton, but surprisingly piano, for him, was like riding a bike. He never forgot it. Every summer he would get home and try his best *not* to play the Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy, but every year, it came out flawlessly, and his father would walk up behind him and tell him that if he wanted to be a pianist, that time was over and he'd already missed his chance. He wished he could turn around and yell about how he was actually rather glad about that and he wanted to forget how to play, but he predicted that wouldn't go well. Nothing with his father ever did.

At the very least, it was something Neil was sure he could do well when he wasn't sure of anything else. Not that anyone knew this. Sometimes he would sit at the piano in the study room and, with no rhythm, tap the highest keys until the ringing got someone's attention. They would always ask if he played, and Neil would lie through his

teeth and say no, he hated the piano, actually. It was always so unnecessarily aggressive that whoever asked almost always ended their conversation with him. Charlie had asked him what pianist hurt him, Neil didn't answer. Knox had asked if a piano had gotten dropped on his head as a kid, Neil didn't answer. Meeks had asked if he was viciously loyal to some other instrument, Neil brushed him off. Todd never asked. Todd sat next to him on the piano bench, leaning his back against Neil's shoulder and scribbling down illegible poetry. Neil figured Todd got the memo of what the vibe was in the piano corner. Someone asked Todd if he wrote poetry, and Todd told them he could barely conceive of a rhyme.

The only difference was Todd actually liked writing poetry, but Neil *hated* playing the piano. As far as Todd knew, though, Neil couldn't even play, so Neil had no real idea why Todd always decided to sit with him on the piano bench. It sure wasn't because he wanted Neil reading what he was writing. Whenever he tried, he got slapped, so he would go back to pressing piano keys until their time was up and they had to go back to their dorms.

Ginny was the only person who knew that Neil played the piano, and that was because she was playing a song so, so wrong once that Neil couldn't help himself and ended up correcting her. Ginny then pressured him into playing whatever song he could, he reluctantly did, and afterward he could've swore Ginny was in love with him for at least five minutes. Over the summer, they'd spent most of their time together, and both their parents definitely thought they were dating. No. They just didn't have any other friends. Sam had moved away with Avery, for that apparently had become an option, Harley and Josh were long gone, so it was just him and Ginny, and they didn't really *care* to make other friends.

Neil, however, had his friends back at Welton. He had Charlie and Knox and Meeks and Pitts and Todd. Ginny didn't really have anybody like that. She had Chris, only because somehow she was still dating the troglodyte that was Chet Danbury, but that was pretty much it. Consequently, Ginny grew an attachment to Neil's friends, and Neil didn't really mind. If that meant that they got invited to the things Ginny invited him too, he didn't mind at all, actually. Especially when it was an off-campus Halloween party at the Danbury's house. Now, in eighth grade, Neil would've probably had to have written seven different essays enticing his parents to let him go, but apparently high school came with some privileges. His father told him to have fun. Have fun? Neil half-thought that his dad believed that going to a high school party would help make Neil normal. Neil didn't see the appeal

in that, of course he didn't, but he didn't object. He let his dad help him in the right ways for the wrong reasons.

Charlie was, of course, ecstatic. He loved parties and opportunities to break the rules. He loved Ginny. And, most importantly, he loved acting like a total dickhead in obnoxiously rich people's houses, which Neil found hypocritical. He'd never seen Charlie's house, but he knew for a fact that it could probably fit three of Neil's in it. Though, Neil supposed, Charlie probably acted the most dickish in his own house. Knox had jumped on the bandwagon immediately, and based on Charlie's reaction at his eagerness, Neil had to figure it wasn't because Charlie was going. Knox was excited for some other reason. Neil didn't know what it was besides the fact that it wasn't Charlie and that Charlie would drink a bottle of vodka and cry to Neil about it later, but he would deal with that as it came. Pitts loved being around people, so he was on board instantly. Meeks took a little more convincing, but eventually the group got him in. Cameron wasn't even asked, and Todd, well, Todd was being difficult.

"I don't want to, Neil," Todd said, sitting at his desk and not even looking at the boy in question. He was pretending to do some sort of assignment, but Neil could tell he was just drawing lines on a page in his notebook. "Sorry."

Neil wasn't in to forcing Todd to do things he didn't want to do, so normally, when he could tell that Todd *truly* didn't want to do something, Neil would drop it and leave him alone, but not since he'd developed his crush on him. He wanted Todd with him every chance he got, and at a party with him sounded close to the best thing that could've happened. So he whined loudly and sat at the edge of Todd's bed so he could complain directly into Todd's ear. "Why? Why do you hate me?"

"Shut up," Todd said, "I don't hate you I just—I just don't want to go."

"Why?" Neil repeated.

"Eat a sock," Todd responded and tried to resume pretending to do work, but Neil swiped the pencil out of his hand and slid it behind his ear. "Hey!"

"You can have it back to do your oh-so-important work when you give me a *real* reason," Neil said, "Give me a real reason and I'll leave you be."

"Not wanting to go isn't a real reason?"

Ah, well that question made Neil sound kind of like a dick, but he couldn't back down now. "No. Not this time."

Todd fell back in his chair, probably regretting lending his desk set and pencils to Cameron that night. "It's... too many people, Neil. Not my style. I don't want to go."

"Come *on*," Neil begged, "What a load of bull! You were perfectly fine at Ginny's birthday party!"

"That was different. It was just us, then," Todd disputed, "This time it's people I don't know, who don't know me, who are going to be judging —"

"Well, forget that! Who cares about them?" Neil interrupted, "Your friends like you. *I* like you." If Todd wasn't cowering at the volume of Neil's voice before, he was when it was those words getting yelled at him. Neil took a breath to calm down and then got off the bed to kneel in front of Todd in his chair. He lowered his voice. "Isn't that enough?"

Todd fell back at that and refused to meet Neil's eyes. "That's not fair, Neil." Neil wasn't sure how to respond to that because he knew he was pushing it. He knew he should've just given up and left Todd alone, but he couldn't, even though he wanted to—not for the life of him. Todd wasn't sure how to continue either, so he quietly asserted that he wasn't going and turned away from Neil completely.

"I just want you to have fun," Neil tried, knowing he would hardly be able to justify his pushiness this time around. Even Charlie would be telling him to give it up at this point. He should've just apologized and *left Todd alone*, but he couldn't.

"I have fun!" Todd shouted, and suddenly he was out of his chair, hovering over Neil who was still kneeling on the ground. "Just because I don't have *your* version of fun doesn't mean I don't have any! I'm not like you, Neil. I don't like being surrounded by people. I don't like gatherings. I just don't like any of it, and I thought you knew that! I thought you understood that." He fell on his own knees right in front of Neil. "You're the only one that understood that."

"Todd, I—" Neil took a breath, "I *do* understand. I do."

"You did," Todd corrected, looking up through his bangs at Neil, which Neil hated. Todd's bangs were his veil when he didn't want to make eye contact with Neil, but couldn't say whatever he was about to

say without at least looking at him. Neil wanted to cover his mouth and tell him to forget it, but he was frozen with the fear and morbid curiosity of what was about to be said. "Something's wrong with you, Neil."

"What?"

"Something's wrong," Todd repeated, "You're different. You've been different."

"But—"

"I don't like it." Todd was teary now, and Neil was wondering how in the world a conversation about a party had turned into this. Todd sniffed and wiped under his eye. "And I hate—is it us being roommates? I don't know."

"What do you mean?"

"You're pushy," Todd laughed at his own choice of words shortly, "I mean, you're *always* pushy, but you've crossed the line from encouraging pushy to consent-ignoring pushy. It's not you. Last year, *you* wouldn't have even gone to the party if I said I didn't want to go."

"So I have to cater to you now?" *Neil, shut up.* Todd barely reacted to those words. Thankfully, he knew Neil well enough to know that he was just acting out because he hated being told he was being a bad friend. All Neil tried to do in life was be a good friend, and for the most part, he thought he was successful, so when someone tried to tell him otherwise, he got defensive. Only five minutes later when he was on his own would he realize that he was disappointing everyone, but in the moment, his pride took over. However, Todd didn't know Neil well enough to know why he was acting like this, why he had changed... "If you have something to tell me Todd, just say it. If you hate me, just say it!"

Todd grabbed Neil's hand and played with his fingers delicately. "I don't know who you are." He looked up into Neil's eyes—where Neil saw a horribly sad twinkle that broke his heart in two—and said, "Have fun at your party." He dropped Neil's hand and climbed back up into his desk chair like nothing had happened.

-

"You sound kind of like a dick," Ginny said while sipping out of a red solo cup that was definitely filled with apple juice. Charlie was behind

her, nodding in support drinking a liquid that was definitely *not* anything close to apple juice. He was trying to make Knox so concerned for him that he would have to spend the entire party babysitting him and not wandering off doing something else. It hardly worked. Knox was focused on something else and pawned a loopy Charlie onto Ginny to deal with while she therapized Neil, who was rehashing his previous conversation with Todd. She absentmindedly patted Charlie's nodding head and gave Neil a quick look of *why did Knox do this to me?*

"I am," Neil agreed, "I totally am. But—what is he talking about? I'm trying to get it, and I can't."

Ginny looked as if she wanted to shrug, but she couldn't or Charlie, who was leaning on her for support, would've crashed to the ground. "Ask him."

"He doesn't want to talk to me," He replied lowly, "Not that he'd tell me."

"Wouldn't he?" Ginny turned and propped Charlie up against the counter. "He brought this up, so clearly he wants to."

"Okay, fine," Neil submitted, "Maybe *I* don't want him to tell me. I don't want him to tell me that he can't tolerate me anymore. That he doesn't like who I am. I can't do that. The second I ask is the second he's done with me, and I'd rather not spark it."

"God, Juliet, take a breath!" Ginny said, "You're not being you, he's right. Todd isn't an asshole. He's not going to do that to you! You know that, for god's sake. But you're treating him like shit!"

"I don't understand how!"

"He spelt it out for you," Ginny said, annoyed, but Neil couldn't tell if it was because of him or because Charlie was playing with the ends of her curly hair. "I'm all for self-care, but you're way too into what you want now that you've finally figured your shit out. Somehow, you care less about him now that you like him. You from last year would've punched you from two hours ago in the fucking face if he saw you pressuring Todd. God, look in a mirror or something, Neil, I don't know!"

Neil internalized that advice, making sure to show it on his face that he was, before taking Ginny's cup of apple juice and drinking from it, realizing it was spiked with a little bit of *something*. After his moment

passed, he smirked at Ginny through a sip. "What's got your panties in a twist?"

"What?" Ginny asked, crossing her arms and looking at him. "Shut up."

Charlie laughed out loud, and it sounded like it was bursting viciously from an alcohol bubble in his throat. He bonked the bottom of his cup against the back of Ginny's head. "Me and her got a simlar' problum'. Int' tha' right Gin-Gin?"

Ginny shoved both boys away from her in one fatal swoop. "Charlie, go take a shower. Neil, go journal or something. Both of you, leave me alone." She pushed past the both of them, officially leaving Neil to babysit Charlie. He looked to his friend who was whistling some kind of overture and reaching for his cup. Neil subtly switched it out for a nearby cup of water, and Charlie didn't even notice he was gurgling a healthy substance until the cup was entirely empty. He glared at Neil, pointing a witchy, accusing finger at him, and Neil rolled his eyes and grabbed his sleeve, dragging him through the party until he found an empty bathroom. He shoved Charlie in and locked the door from the inside before slamming it shut.

Two seconds later, he was wandering the second floor of the Danbury's house. He didn't remember walking away from the bathroom or even up the stairs, but he credited that to whatever the mystery substance mixed with the apple juice was. He stumbled upon Knox with his ear pressed up against a door, but he didn't really process it until he was running into him and they were both crashing into the floor. Knox turned around and dragged Neil into a nearby closet quickly, swinging the door shut and shrouding them both in newfound darkness.

"What are you doing?" Neil asked pointedly.

"Sleeping," Said Knox's voice through the darkness.

"Want to go sleep in the bathroom downstairs? Charlie's down there."

"I don't want to be anywhere near Charlie."

"Huh?"

"I'm moving on!" Knox said, and Neil realized he was definitely drunk. There was nothing he could say, though, because so was he. *God,* he thought, *we're fourteen.*

"What has that got to do with 'sleeping' against a door?"

"Chris's in there," Knox slurred and then his face morphed into one of disgust, "With *Chet*."

"Oh, her boyfriend?" Neil sarcastically asked, "How dare she!"

Knox tried to punch Neil, or something, but whatever he was trying to do, he failed and punched the wall right next to Neil's knee. He cried out in pain and cradled his hand against his chest. "Shuddup. Where's Todd?"

"He didn't come."

"What?" Knox asked, leaning his ear forward. The music had suddenly surged.

"He's not here."

"Huh!?"

Neil leaned forward right next to Knox's ear. "HE DIDN'T WANT TO COME!"

"Oh," Knox said at a regular volume, "And you still came?"

Neil fell back against the wall behind him. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, are Meeks and Pitts staying behind too?"

"What?"

"What?!" Knox yelled.

Neil slapped his knee and he yelped. "There's not even any loud music, dipshit."

"I *asked* if Meeks and Pitts stayed behind too," Knox repeated, "I thought they were coming."

Neil was beyond confused. "They did come."

"So where's Todd?"

"Home," Neil answered, but his body involuntarily shuddered at the aspect of calling that place home, so he went elaborated. "In our dorm,

at school."

Neil could see Knox's scrunched face of confusion. "One more time?'"

"Peets and Mitks are here," Neil said, absolutely butchering his friends names, but still was sure that Knox understand regardless. "Todd is at school."

"And you're *here*?" Knox asked, "You left him alone there?"

"I'm not his fucking babysitter," Neil said angrily, and it barely sounded like his own voice, let alone something coming out of his mouth. "He didn't ask me to."

"And?" Knox asked, and that was all Neil got before he army rolled out of the closet and down the hall, leaving Neil by himself. Eventually, he clawed himself out of the clothes pile, stumbled down the stairs, and started looking for a way to get back to Welton.

-

When Neil walked into his dorm, it was the last thing Todd was expecting. Todd was on his bed—sorry, not *his* bed—Todd was on Neil's bed reading Dracula, which Neil found odd for more than a few reasons. Todd never reread books. At the least, not that frequently. The last one he'd reread was... well, Neil couldn't even remember that's how long it had been. All he knew was that something was off, but it didn't take much for Neil to realize that was happening. For a moment, though, everything was normal. Todd didn't look up from where he was biting his thumbnail and turning a page of Dracula, not even when Neil crept closer and sat on the edge of the bed. It was the fact that the silence continued... it never did that after Neil sat down. Todd usually kicked Neil in the side, a telltale sign to scoot up next to him so they could read together, but Todd barely acknowledged his presence, and Neil realized the silence wasn't normal—it was Todd ignoring him.

Neil nervously tapped his fingers on his knee. How had he messed up this bad? Two months into the first school year where he actually had a crush on Todd and he had already fucked it up. He wished once more for the simplicity and intimacy of his and Todd's relationship before Neil had developed feelings. He figured he should start with an apology.

"Todd?" Todd didn't look up, and Neil took in a breath, trying not to cry. "I'm sorry. You were right." Todd made a movement that Neil

could faintly conceive as a nod. "You didn't miss anything, not that you thought you would." Neil thought maybe if he kept talking, at the least Todd would tell him to shut up eventually. It didn't happen. "Charlie'll be out of commission tomorrow, for sure. Maybe Knox, too. Uh, I didn't have any fun." Todd made a 'hm' sound, and Neil really couldn't tell if it was response to him or a response to the book. Todd responded audibly to books occasionally—at least a lot more often than Todd breaking his oath of silence when he was ignoring Neil. "I want to show you something, if you want."

Neil only sighed when he was met with more silence, and he got up and left the room, shutting the door quietly behind him. He headed to the study room, which was unlocked since it was a Friday night where the high schoolers basically had free reign to do whatever they wanted. Hager probably doubted that any one of them would want to waste their time in there, and he was mostly right. Neil was in there by himself, so he wandered over to the piano and sat down on the bench. He could play whatever Beethoven or Mozart shit you asked him to. It was basically programmed into him, but right as he was about to tap out his punishment and remind himself that he had this hate-able skill, a sound of static distracted his fingers from the keys. He turned around and noticed a radio—an actual radio, not Pitts and Meeks' sketchy one.

He got off of the bench and walked up to it, turning a dial hesitantly until actual music started playing. When they had put that in there, Neil couldn't tell you, but he could tell you they were definitely going to take it back after Halloween weekend. A treat that barely anyone could enjoy. Sounds exactly like Hager. Neil sat in front of the radio as the songs switched. He wasn't that into any of the music on the radio give or take a few songs. Actually listening to the radio informed him that they had it good when theirs only played *Love Potion No. 9* or *Stand By Me*. The song he was listening to had a piano riff in the background, and it suddenly occurred to him that he could recreate this music on the piano. I mean, notes came from somewhere after all, right?

He experimented on-and-off, trying to play a chorus on the piano back at the speaker of the radio. After a few tries, he eventually got the notes to match, or at least sound like it. Maybe he was in a different key or a half step off, but he really didn't care. He almost forgot that the like of his life was mad at him finally enjoying playing the piano, but soon he realized he still hated the fucking piano, he just liked that he had a good ear, and he could prove it. To prove this to himself, since there was a split second where he nearly liked the piano, he

quickly tapped out The Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy, and the disgust crept right back into his body.

"You can play piano," A voice said, followed by the closing of the study room door. Neil almost got whiplash from how fast he turned around. Todd was standing there with Dracula in one hand. Neil tried to hide a smirk. He knew Todd wouldn't be able to resist following him after he said *I want to show you something.* Sometimes when Neil said that, it was something incredibly dangerous that Todd had to stop, so he wasn't proud of this method of luring Todd, but, hey, it worked. "You didn't tell me you could play the piano."

"I didn't tell anyone," Neil responded, "I don't like anyone knowing."

Todd was baffled. "Why?"

"Because," Neil shrugged.

Todd gave up on trying to comprehend his friend. "So what did you want to show me?"

"That I can play the piano."

"Okay, huh?" Todd asked, sitting down on the arm of the couch closest to him. The space between him and Neil was taunting. There was never space between them.

"S'part of who I am," Neil said quietly, "So I wanted to show you—and me, I guess."

"So telling everyone you hate the piano?" Todd started, "What is that?"

"I do hate the piano," Neil answered and looked disdainfully at the ivory instrument. "But, of course, it's the one thing I'm good at." Todd's smile was a surprise to Neil because he had no idea how Todd even had the capacity to smile at him right now. He looked away. He didn't deserve to have Todd smiling at him. "What're you cheesin' at?"

"Nothing," Todd said, and Neil could hear the stupid smile in his tone, "Just—this whole piano thing is very *Neil* of you."

"Breaking the silent treatment to make fun of me is very *Todd* of you."

Todd rolled his eyes. "Don't tell me you didn't deserve that."

"I did. I was being a dick," Neil agreed and looked up at him, "I'm sorry for trying to force you to go to a party."

"I'm sorry for making it seem like you wanting to spend time with me was an asshole thing to do," Todd responded, "But that's it. Trying to pressure me *is* an asshole thing to do."

"And usually I don't," Neil continued, "So, yeah, I get what you were saying. I don't know what's wrong with me." Neil didn't mean for his voice to break, but it did. On the bright side, it made Todd stand up, walk over to him, and put a hand in his hair, kind of petting him like he was a sad bunny.

"That was a harsh way to put it," Todd relented, "I was mad. I didn't mean it like that."

Neil resisted the urge to lean into Todd's touch. "How'd you mean it?"

"I didn't mean it in any way." Todd took a seat on the bench next to Neil. "I just... something's bothering you, and I'm worried. Thas' all."

"You have a vicious way of showing your worry."

"Don't even," Todd said, and after a few moments of quiet asked, "So are you going to tell me? What's wrong, I mean? Probably not, huh?"

"Let me just say I would love to," Neil started, "But, no, I don't think so." He looked over at the copy of Dracula Todd had thrown on the couch before walking over to him. He pointed at it, "What's up with that?"

Todd didn't even have to ask what he was talking about, and started blushing. "Thought it would make me feel better." And then quieter, "Thought I was losin' you."

Neil got very serious. "Never." Todd didn't respond, so he grabbed his shoulders and made sure they were facing each other. "Never. You know that, right?"

"I think so," Todd answered, "You're just hard to read sometimes."

Neil didn't think that was true. He thought he was an open book. Daddy issues, unstable best friends, repressed anger. It was basically all written on a page for anybody to read. His cocked eyebrow pulled a laugh from Todd, who definitely thought Neil had something to hide. Besides his crush on Todd, he really didn't. "How so?"

"I don't know Mister 'are we both still straight?'" Todd started, and Neil already feared where this was going to end up. He had a horrible

hunch. "I was pretty damn sure you were going to burn me at the stake when you found out I kissed Charlie."

"Charlie kissed *you*," Neil corrected.

"Tomato, to-mah-to," Todd waved dismissively, "Just—going from that to the sixth grade incident was a culture shock."

Neil shoved his head into his hands, even though this topic of conversation was exactly what he had predicted. "I thought we were all done bringing that up. Especially after—" Neil took a pause and gulped.

"Yes?" Todd prompted, and his confidence and obliviousness at Neil's wandering thoughts and lovesick crush was torture.

"After our conversation that night." Finally, once Neil said that, Todd stopped being so cocky. Neil squinted and leaned toward him. "Yeah, Anderson, I remember what you said." *And, fuck, it was hot.*

"It was just what *you* said," Todd rebutted with a stutter, "I didn't—I wasn't serious."

Neil stared him dead in the eye, feeling a surge of him from last year coming on. "I was."

Todd tried to shove him to defuse the moment. "Shut up."

Neil knew he had a tendency to go off the rails when the mood shifted even a little bit, so he gave in to Todd's de-fusion and left the piano bench. He grabbed *Dracula* off of the couch cushions, and then collapsed on them. He patted the spot next to him and looked up at Todd, who was red from head-to-toe, and he nearly thought he was actually just going to sprint off and leave Neil there on the couch by himself. He didn't. He eventually sat next to Neil and held his hand out for the book, which Neil gladly handed over to him. Todd read silently, letting Neil read over his shoulder, but Neil wasn't paying attention to the words, he just mumbled whenever he knew Todd was done so he could turn the page. He was focused more on Todd himself.

He needed to tone his crush down. It was going to make things weird, and he already knew nothing like that could happen between them. He wouldn't let it. Not if there was a chance at all that he would hurt Todd, and there was... because he already had. He hurt Todd in fifth grade, in seventh grade, that very day. It was a pattern, he did it over

and over again, and if he wasn't so attached to him, he'd slowly phase himself out of the poor boy's life. He knew it would be ten times worse in a romantic context. Don't get him wrong, he didn't wish to be back in that purgatory of wanting to like Todd but not being able to, he was way-past happy he was out of that stage, but he wanted a combination of how he acted then and how he felt now. Then he would've been solid.

But right then all he could do was stare at the side of Todd's face as he reread *Dracula*, and that was fine because looking at him made all of his pain worth it.

As long as Todd was there—Neil would live.

Chapter End Notes

i hope you all enjoyed < 3

Freshman Year—How Did We Get Here From Masturbation?

Chapter Summary

Neil's problems lead to more and more problems.

Chapter Notes

CW// explicit mentions of masturbation, voyeurism, angst, crying, arguing

TW!!// explicit mentions of self-harm

didn't edit her just threw her up so hope she's okay <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil was aware every boy in his school masturbated. Being Charlie's roommate for five years wasn't good for nothing. At the very least, Charlie's regular habits assured Neil that he was not only normal, but doing way better than his roommate was. Neil could understand doing it every week. Every night , however, he could not. Despite Charlie being young, Neil didn't know how he could have that much in him to do it every night. Neil, himself, did it about every three months. After the sixth grade incident, he'd stopped entirely for a while, but apparently jerking off helped him relieve stress. He just knew, because of Charlie's stupid tendencies, that it took a lot for him to finish. Realistically, he should've been done in a second or two with how much he didn't do it, but it took him twenty to thirty minutes, and that's if he was thinking about something. Charlie, Mira, Knox, Sam, Meeks, hell, Avery a few times, none of them exactly set a record for him. Hearing Charlie was severely different, and that's when he realized his imagination simply wasn't enough for him. He needed real material, not made up scenarios. Real sounds, real sights, and trust him, he hated himself immensely for it, but there wasn't exactly anything he could do. One time he stole one of Charlie's magazines, but that didn't do it for him either. Eventually, he just came to the conclusion that Charlie had broken him. The only time he finished was when he woke up from a dream, and sometimes even the real feelings those dreams gave him weren't enough for him. Don't get him wrong, he got inconvenient boners eighty percent of the time, but it was always a cold shower or time that fixed that problem for him.

When he got a girlfriend, he hoped for the best, but he was also twelve and they hardly got past first base. He grew more hopeful when he started liking Todd. He already thought about jumping him every other second, so surely picturing a situation where that happened would be enough to help him. It still wasn't. It was becoming a real problem. Neil felt like he was going to explode any time soon. Charlie would hardly shut up about each time he got it on. Apparently, Ginny Danbury's first floor bathroom was a sexy place. All it did was make Neil feel worse. Not that he'd ever say that to Charlie. The boy would probably try to jack him off. So that's why he was sitting at the end of Meeks' bed while Meeks sat in a chair and Pitts on the other side of the room.

"Why do you think this might be happening?" Meeks had his hands folded under his chin and he looked scarily like a professional.

"Aren't you supposed to tell me?" Neil asked him.

"I need some starter information," Meeks answered, "So get on with it. I've got English homework."

"Because Charlie ruined me," Neil said plainly. At this point, the sixth grade incident wasn't a secret to anyone in their friend group besides Cameron. It wasn't something they talked about often either, so Neil always tried his hardest to not bring it up. That wasn't exactly an option when Meeks was practically interrogating him.

"Are you saying you think only hearing Charlie would help you achieve climax?"

Neil straightened immediately and looked at his friend. "Why would you say it like that?" Meeks shrugged, and Neil decided he barely wanted to know anymore anyway. "And, no. No, no, no. I can finish without Charlie."

"Have you?" Meeks asked.

"Well, yeah…"

"Then what are we doing here?" Meeks changed his question when he saw Neil's glare. "When was the last time?"

"During the summer, I think."

"The summer!?" Meeks tried to hide his shock as to not freak Neil out, but it was a bit too late. He took off his glasses and wiped them off on

his shirt and Neil noticed that Pitts was now shooting them both a concerned glance. “What was- How?”

“Nothing,” Neil answered quickly like it was a built-in defense mechanism. Because it was. The way it had happened, his body basically vowed to keep it a secret before his brain did. Meeks gave him a disappointed therapist glare, however, so he relented. “Todd’s shirt.”

Pitts leaned forward with a disgusting curiosity. “Go on.”

“He gave me a shirt. In sixth grade. I bring it back each break for him to wash with the rest of his laundry so it still smells like him.” At first, Neil snuck it into Todd’s laundry basket only for him to steal it back out again, but when Todd noticed a shirt he hadn’t worn in two years, Neil decided explaining would be the lesser of two evils. Better Todd knowing than thinking some sort of laundry ghost was going to become a new problem in his life. Neil scratched any part of his body he could in discomfort. “I didn’t bring it back over the summer.”

“Did you bring it back after fall break?”

Neil shivered with internal disgust. He was disgusting. “Yes.”

“And you gave it to Todd?”

“Yes,” Neil answered, but moved on quickly, “I don’t see what that has to do with my issue though.”

“It was the last time!” Meeks defended, “It’s important, alright? What exactly did you do with it?”

Neil leaned forward and shoved his head in his hands, groaning, “Aw, Meeks.”

“This is a no judgment zone!” Meeks yelled.

“I didn’t do anything with it, alright?” Neil bursted out in defense. “It just smelt like when he’s all close to me and I-“

“So you need Todd to cum?” Pitts tried to pitch in.

“No!” Neil shouted instantly, “Have you been listening? Thinking about Todd doesn’t work. Nothing works. That’s the problem. The shirt has nothing to do with this.”

“I think it does, actually,” Meeks contradicted, “It just sounds like

you're a physical kind of person, Neil."

"So what does that mean?" Neil asked, "I can't jack off without sniffing clothes or perving on Charlie?"

Meeks shrugged. "I guess so, but does it really matter? Just wait until you get some, I guess."

Neil groaned and left the room with the unhelpful conversation playing on repeat in his head. He basically just told his two friends he jerked it into Todd's shirt for virtually no reason. Even worse, he brought that shirt back and made Todd wash it, knowing that…

He was disgusting.

What was worse was even the thought of Todd touching that shirt was more appealing to him than the thought of cornering Todd in a nearby supply closet. Now, how does that make any sense? He supposed he'd just have to become a celibate by choice and not because he couldn't get himself to completion. It'd be better than staring at himself in the mirror and knowing he was the only teenage boy in the whole world who could get it up but not get it off. If it was a choice, then he wouldn't even have to experience not being able to do it anymore. He had bigger problems anyway. Soccer games, honor society's, the school annual, grades… all far more important than successful masturbation.

So he gave up for the rest of October. Pushed away every single unholy thought and focused purely on sports and schoolwork and not on being a normal boy at all. He couldn't tell whether his grades were getting worse or better, but he only hoped they weren't getting worse so he wouldn't have to go on a phone call with his father and explain the drop like ' sorry pops, just haven't jacked it in a while! should be able to get back on track once l hear someone finish!' It didn't feel good as it was, but he felt like his father would turn it into a way to make him feel like even more of an outcast weirdo.

Luckily, his grades were about the same. At his birthday dinner his father had checked him out for, he got a mild speech, which meant that nothing much had changed. So he enjoyed a plate of non-Hell-ton pasta and tried to have a nice dinner. Birthday dinners were never nice, though, because they were always another excuse for Mr. Perry to enforce more future decisions onto Neil. He stopped listening halfway through and got himself kicked out of his own dinner. He was supposed to spend that night at his own house to eat cake with his

mom and sleep in his own bed, but after his stunt of ignoring his father, he was sent back to his dorm way after curfew. When he walked into the room, the lights were still on and it was evident that Todd had no idea Neil was coming back. Not like he could've known, and suddenly Neil was wishing he barged into his own room without anyone knowing more often.

The bedside lamp was on, and usually when it was on past lights out it meant Todd was either at his desk doing homework or on top of his covers reading. Neither of those things were happening, and Neil didn't know what was happening until he examined Todd's flushed face, a disheveled blanket, and a bump in the fabric that was very clearly a stalled hand. Neil tried not to stare, really, but his body liked doing the opposite of what he wanted it to do. Eventually he picked his jaw off the ground and just started changing into pajamas like that was a normal thing to do after catching your roommate getting off. He kept his back to Todd and only checked over his shoulder to confirm to himself that the sound of blankets moving was Todd adjusting quickly while Neil couldn't see him and not Todd continuing to the sight of Neil's back muscles. He was fairly sure it was the former, but his imagination didn't want to be so sure.

"I didn't think you were going to be back tonight," Todd said after a long moment of Neil trying to hang up his blazer on a hanger and his shaky fingers continuously dropping it. Neil was, for once, thankful for Todd's inability to be straightforward. He'd talk around the fact Neil had caught him unless Neil brought it up himself, and he was not planning on it. To the best of his ability, he was going to pretend he hadn't even processed what had been going on. "Did… Did something happen?"

Neil shrugged and finally hung up his damn blazer in his closet. "Not really. I'm just- uh…" Neil's fingers trailed the side of his open cabinet door while he was thrown into silence by the sudden sight of Todd's tussled hair. What was he thinking about? Oh, leave it alone, Neil. It's none of your business. "Just wanted to sleep in my room on my birthday night."

Todd nervously chortled and ran a hand through his hair like he knew it's messiness was driving Neil crazy. "Yeah, I thought that was the point."

Neil closed the closet slowly with a sad, empty laugh. "Any bed in this whole place is more comforting than my room at home."

“That can’t be true,” Todd argued.

“Fine, it’s not,” Neil agreed, “Any bed across from yours is better than my bed at home.” Todd was thrown into silence after a very, loud gulp. Neil realized nothing else was going to be said about it, so he got into his bed and shuffled under the sheets, hoping his pants were loose enough to not expose him way before he planned on being exposed. He reached behind him and rested his hand on the lamp. “I’m tired.”

Todd looked at Neil’s fingers playing with the lamp string. He swallowed hard again. Neil could tell because he was staring at his Adam’s apple like it was edible. “You can turn it off.”

“Are you sure?” Neil asked, “I can keep it… uh… turned on .”

“Turn it off,” Todd said at his tone, “Please.” He tugged his blanket downwards and Neil swallowed himself and then looked back up into Todd’s eyes.

“Thanks,” He said, “I’m about to pass out and-“

“You can’t sleep with the light on,” Todd cut him off and crossed his arms. “I know. Goodnight, Neil.”

Neil’s hand pulled the lamp string and plunged them into darkness before he had meant for it to happen. In the black, he whispered out, “Goodnight.” Then he curled in on himself in shock and flipped over to the wall, being tired as hell but definitely not being able to go to bed. That’s when he heard the telltale sounds of blanket shuffling again, and he couldn’t stop himself from reaching down beneath his waistband and listening to the breathy sounds Todd was doing a very bad job of hiding. Surely Todd knew that, no matter how tired Neil was, he wouldn’t fall asleep that quickly. And that meant one of two things in Neil’s suddenly horny mind:

1. The least likely option, Todd wanted Neil to hear him. No matter how unlikely the thought was it made Neil’s hand go faster.

2. A little more likely, Todd was so desperate he couldn’t wait, and somehow that was worse for Neil’s stamina.

He basically came untouched, and he changed in record speed when Todd got up to go take care of himself. He stared at the ceiling, breathing heavily and dirtily patting himself on the back for knowing Todd so well that he could time himself to finish at the exact same

time as him. Or, he was pretty sure he had at least. As he finished, all he could hear was a ringing in his ears that wasn't there and every breath that he was letting out that was definitely two times quieter than his brain was telling them they were. He carefully listened for anxious breathing from Todd when he crept back into the room, but he didn't notice anything that was off. Or anything that would imply Todd knew that Neil had heard him, listened to him, and enjoyed it. He was lucky Jeffery didn't know that he had come back that night, so he felt no need to check on Todd. Neil was lucky for a lot of things, actually, but that was the main thing. If Jeffery had seen that, it would've been reported straight back to the Anderson's and Neil would've landed himself a very special place in a nearby conversion camp.

On one hand, he was breathing heavily and convinced he was going to burn in hell. On the other, he didn't give a fuck. It made him feel better to know that he wasn't incapable of finishing anymore. If Todd knew, if *anyone* knew, that would be a different story, but as it was, it was Neil's little secret. And it was a one-time thing. He basically was owed it at that point, an opportunity to let some steam off. He didn't realize how much being pent up had changed him until the next day when all of his friends wouldn't stop staring at him. During study hall, he decided to acknowledge it.

"Can I help you?" He lifted his head up and asked Meeks, who was squinting in his direction, like he was trying to figure out something. Meeks only faltered a little bit when Neil revealed that he knew he'd been being stared at the entire time, and it annoyed him. "Seriously, can I help you?"

"You did it, didn't you?" Meeks responded, and Neil knew what he was referring to immediately. He nearly jumped across the table to stick his hands in Meeks' mouth and face to shut him up, but it was evident to him suddenly that he couldn't prevent his other friends from figuring out what Meeks meant. One look at all of them proved they all already knew. When Neil resumed eye contact with Meeks, his eyebrow was raised. "Mm?"

"Yeah," Neil said and slumped in his chair, feeling more than slightly embarrassed that all his friends could see something like that in his behavior.

Todd, however, was deeply confused. He tapped the eraser end of his pencil on his notebook and looked around. "Did what?"

Meeks examined Todd for a few seconds, then tilted his head at Neil and raised his eyebrows even more. Neil immediately said, "Don't."

"But it was?"

"It was," Neil answered quickly, "So don't."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Charlie said suddenly and slid closer to the conversation, "There's *more* to it?"

"No," Neil said.

"Yes, absolutely there is," Meeks answered, then met eyes with Neil, who was giving him the worst death glare he could conjure. "Not. There absolutely is not."

Charlie looked between Meeks and Neil before leaning back in his chair. "Yeah, sure."

"More to what?" Todd asked, "What are we talking about?"

Pitts looked at him, "You really can't tell?"

"Can't tell *what*?"

"Be *quiet,* Pitts," Neil hissed, but that didn't really help him out because it only caused Todd to turn to him. "I don't know what they're talking about."

Todd looked suddenly very nervous and Neil could hear the distinct rhythm of Todd anxiously tapping his shoes. He always did it like he was tap dancing to *One Last Kiss* from *Bye Bye Birdie*. Neil didn't know how he'd developed such a habit, and it was only another reason Neil wondered how he hadn't fallen in love with them earlier. Todd looked near tears and refused to look away from Neil. "You didn't—did you?"

Charlie cocked his head. "So you *do* know what we're talking about?"

"I don't—I—" Todd stuttered, "I might."

Neil was glad his mind moved faster than common miscommunications. "No, no, no, you guys are talking about different things. No, Todd, I didn't—" Neil lowered his voice to a whisper and leaned in Todd's direction. "I didn't tell them *that*. Why would I do that?"

"Then what are you talking about?" Todd responded.

"Nothing," Neil answered, then he began to talk louder so every single one of his friends could hear him. "They're just making a big deal out of nothing."

"You finally getting off after months of not *is* a big deal!" Charlie shouted, barely caring about the looks he attracted from the other boys in the room. He never did care, especially when it was about masturbation. Unfortunately, Charlie was an open book. His book couldn't even be closed. The covers were ripped off and long gone. You could judge Charlie upon first glance because he had no cover. "Really, I'm happy for you. When was the last time? Me?"

"No," Neil said, "Be quiet, Charlie."

"About that? Fine," Charlie agreed, "About this? Absolutely not. What was it? Being at home?"

Todd was looking between Charlie and Neil over and over again, and Neil could only hope to God he wasn't piecing together the puzzle that Charlie was putting forth for him. Neil couldn't exactly blame Charlie for saying what he was saying. He didn't realize that he was trying to hide it from Todd specifically. He probably thought Neil went home the previous night and peeped on one of his neighbors or something. Not that he'd walked in on Todd, and not that he'd... done what he actually had done. Charlie was bad at picking up hints, so he kept going and Neil didn't have any power to stop him. He felt as helpless as he did at Ginny Danbury's thirteenth birthday party.

"Yeah," Neil answered all of his questions dismissively and stared straight down at his open notebook.

—

Neil was hoping the conversation was forgotten by everyone by the time study hall was over. For the most part, that's what it seemed like. Even Charlie wasn't bringing it up, and that was a good omen for what everyone else was thinking. But when it was just him and Todd, it was different. He was scribbling down English assignment drafts on multiple papers on his desk, with one pencil in his hand and one behind his ear. He was looking back and forth between his papers and his typewriter, where he was writing up a letter for a different assignment for a different thing. He was trying his hardest to multitask, and he was usually pretty good at it, but his nerves were off from the morning's conversation, so eventually he gave up on the letter because he didn't want to make a typo. He barely even had time

for the assignment, let alone typos. Todd was behind him on his own bed reading a book. Neil didn't care what book it was, and he wasn't going to ask. He could barely gather the courage to look at Todd because he felt horrible. Post-nut clarity was not a thing for him the night before. It was just hitting him right then what he had done, and how weird it was.

"What were they talking about?" Todd asked after a long hour of silence that Neil appreciated. He was hoping it would be silent for the rest of the night, that Todd would never bring it up again, and he could move on from this horrible shame he had brought upon himself. Of course that's not the way it was going to go. He didn't even know why he bothered having hope for that in the first place. Neil heard a page turn in Todd's book, and when he glanced over his shoulder, he saw that Todd wasn't even looking at him. "During study hall?"

"Oh, nothing," Neil shrugged, trying his best to copy Todd's nonchalance and continue writing in his notebook. It wasn't working very well, and every word he tried to write came off as an unintelligible squiggle. "Just a—I've been having... problems... with something recently. I figured it out." Hardly.

"What was it?"

"What?"

"The problem?" Todd asked, "What was it?"

"It's nothing, like I said," Neil dismissed, and he completely gave up on writing and was just staring hard at the wall in front of him. Todd had no right to sit on his bed and ask Neil these questions while memories of his labored breathing were still fresh on his mind. Todd hadn't gone back to *Todd* yet in Neil's head. He couldn't look at him without thinking he was the hottest thing in the world. So, he just got mad at him and his ability to act so normal when Neil was losing it. "Forget it."

"Why wouldn't you tell me about it?" Todd pressed.

"It was something I wanted to talk about with Charlie."

"Meeks knew," Todd argued, and Neil heard him put his book down and scoot down to the edge of his bed. "And Pitts."

"Charlie can't keep his mouth shut."

"Then why wouldn't *he* tell me?"

"It's embarrassing!" Neil said, and he wasn't lying. "I didn't want you to know."

"I know worse things about you than whatever this is," Todd said, "You're supposed to be normal again! That includes telling me things. God, the last time you *actually* told me something was in fifth grade. Do you just not trust me?"

"It's embarrassing," Neil repeated.

"We're past embarrassing!" Todd yelled.

"Fine. Fine!" Neil stood up out of his chair, thinking quickly of what sort of lie to mix with the little bit of truth he was going to tell. "They were referring to my *masturbation problems*. How I hadn't came in like..." He fell back in his chair, now turned around so he was still facing Todd when he sat down. "God, probably months until last night."

Todd's mouth fell open. "Last night? Like when..."

"Yeah, but it wasn't like *that,*" Neil rushed out of his mouth quickly, "I guess... I just got super petty about it. That you could do it and I couldn't."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Todd asked, "'That I could?' You think I can't?"

"I mean... you don't—I didn't—yeah, I guess." Neil stuttered out several different syllables that barely made sense. No, he didn't think Todd did it. He seemed too innocent to even know what jerking off was. Todd Anderson was a pure little angel. Catching him in a state like that was a culture shock for Neil. Maybe that's what was so hot about it. Neil could picture it happening, but it didn't work because he thought it was a lie. Now, he knew, but that wasn't really important right then. Especially since he'd been meaning to forget about it, not figure it out.

"What the *fuck,* Neil?" Todd spat, "You—I'm not a fucking baby."

"That's not how I meant it."

"That's how I'm taking it," Todd argued, "What the—you fucking asshole."

"It's not that important."

"Bullshit!" Todd shouted, "After everything, there's always something. There's always one little thing you think about me to convince yourself that I'm not normal. Why do you—Why do you *hate* me, Neil? Why does the version of me you're friends with have to be different than who I really am?" Now, that was an interesting tangent, and Neil wasn't sure how they had gotten there from a discussion about masturbation, but he barely cared. Not when Todd was upset. Not when Todd thought Neil didn't know him. Not when Todd thought Neil didn't *like* what he knew.

"I don't hate you," Neil said sternly, "We should stop throwing that word around."

"Oh, now that *I'm* the one saying it?" Todd asked, but then he put his head in his hands and sighed. "Sorry. I'm sorry. Arguing isn't going to do anything or get us anywhere. We just need to talk."

"About jerking off?"

"No—" Todd put his head back in his hands, but this time it was in disappointment. "Not about—no. About... about..."

"I like *all* the versions of you," Neil started after Todd's voice trailed off. "And I had no part in crafting any of them."

"Yeah, right," Todd scoffed.

"It's true!" Neil argued, "I'm sorry. It's not anything like—not thinking you're *normal*. And you don't have to jack off to be normal, by the way."

"Tell yourself that."

"Listen, that was a separate issue. I wanted to, and I couldn't."

"And you didn't tell me."

"Why would I tell you?"

"Maybe you wouldn't!" Todd answered, "But you told everyone else. And that's why it hurts."

"I'm sorry."

"Why don't you tell me things anymore?"

"You don't tell me much anymore either."

"I guess that's true." Todd looked at the ground, but it didn't hide the large blush on his face. "I would like to, though."

"Then tell me something," Neil said, getting off his chair and sitting on their rickety floor boards. He gestured across from him and urged Todd to sit there, and that's about when it got real. Conversations on the floor were much different than conversations anywhere else. They were intense. "And I'll tell you something. Fair?"

"Sure," Todd said, sliding off the edge of his bed and onto the floor. He curled in on himself and avoided looking at Neil, then he chuckled. "I can't—I can't think of anything."

"I'll go first, then," Neil offered, but it took him a second to come up with something, too. He knew there were things he hadn't told Todd. His giant crush on him being one of them, but that was something he wasn't ready to say, yet, so he had to come up with something else, anything else. Eventually he got an idea. "I still don't feel good enough to not be hurting myself every day."

Neil expected Todd to throw something at him, but he just nodded along to the words and slowly processed them. "Me either."

The eye contact between them couldn't of been broken if they tried. "Why?"

"What do I do?" Todd asked in return, "What do *I* do that's so special?"

"You're you," Neil answered, "That's the most special thing you can do."

Todd finally looked down and away from him. "What about you?"

"I don't want to be a doctor," Neil said, "Not even a little bit."

"Then don't."

"I have to," Neil argued, "I'm trapped."

"Not right now," Todd said, "You can be anything you want right now."

Neil smiled a tiny smile. "Then I'm a Broadway actor right now."

"Yeah, I think I've seen your face in Times Square."

"You have?"

"Yeah," Todd answered, "You've won a lot of Tony's."

"You've written a lot of best-selling poems," Neil replied.

Todd took a breath. "Do you perform them?"

"For the right price."

"Shut up," Todd laughed and shoved Neil's knee. "How much?"

"My price... for you..." Neil started, "Is that you have to do anything you want to do."

"What does that mean?"

"Without thinking about anyone else," Neil said, "Or any consequences. I want you to live your life, and then I'll perform your poems for my adoring fans."

"That's a high price."

"It's non-negotiable," Neil said, "So what do you want to do?"

"Right now?"

"Yeah."

The silence before Todd's answer felt like the longest thing Neil had ever been through, and it only lasted for under a couple seconds. In the span of their conversation, they had grown closer to each other. Their knees were touching and Neil didn't know when it had happened, but his hand was on Todd's elbow and Todd's was on his knee. Neil didn't understand what part of himself Todd thought that Neil would try to change. Everything in front of him was perfect.

"I want to kiss you," Todd finally said.

Neil swallowed harder than he'd ever swallowed in his life, and he had no idea how to keep his cool. Todd was very clearly feeling the same way, and Neil had to wave away the seeping regret with a comforting swipe of his thumb on Todd's elbow. His neck was still flushed red, but it wasn't any different from what Neil looked like. "The Broadway actor?"

"No," Todd said, "Just Neil Perry."

"He's not—" Neil cut himself off, "He can't perform your poetry."

"I don't care," Todd said, "He's special enough."

"Enough?" Neil echoed.

"More than."

"For the record," Neil sighed heavily, "I want to kiss you too."

Todd smiled that sad smile that Neil was so unfortunately familiar with. He knew it so well he could predict the next words that were going to come out of Todd's mouth. "I don't believe you."

"I don't understand why."

Todd looked down at Neil's lips and then back up. "It wouldn't be the first time something like this has happened."

"I don't know why I did that," Neil said immediately, knowing exactly what Todd was referring to. And it was true, he *really* didn't know why he had done that. It was reckless and stupid and if he was going to kiss Todd Anderson it damn well should have been more special than in a locker room when they were both half-naked. Neil was a horny teenage boy, sure, but he cared about Todd. He didn't want his first something with him to be a random kiss in a locker room or making out with him in a closet. He wanted something that would show Todd he was in it for the long-run, tell Todd that he would never lie about how he felt about him, never lie *to* him, but he didn't know how to do that, and his stupid, idiotic mistakes weren't helping him out. "What would it take?"

"I don't know," Todd said, and put his hand on the side of Neil's face, smiling at him. "I wish I did."

That's when Neil realized that his worst fear had suddenly become true. Todd liked him, and he'd let him down. He'd been worrying about it for years and it had already happened. He had already done it. He grabbed Todd's hand for a long second before bringing his palm to his lips and kissing it. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Todd said.

"It's not," Neil said, "I care about you too much. I can't—I can't do this." He joined his other hand with the hand that was already wrapped around Todd's. "I promise you I want to. More than anything.

But I can't." Neil didn't realize he was crying until a tear fell off of his face, and he didn't realize Todd was crying until he sniffled. Neil looked up almost instantly at the sound.

"I like you, Neil," Todd admitted in a very low whisper, then took his hand back and shoved it in his lap. "But I can't do this either."

"You like me?" Neil asked, and it seemed like the stupidest question, but Neil wanted Todd to turn around and tell him it was a lie. That didn't happen. Todd nodded as more tears fell down both their faces. Neil was slowly becoming more horrified with himself. With his next question, he almost choked on the words, "How long?" Todd was quiet for too long, so Neil begged, "Please tell me how long."

"I realized at the end of sixth grade," Todd said quietly before slowly looking up to make eye contact with Neil again. "But it's been since we met."

"This whole time?"

"This whole time," Todd confirmed.

"Fuck, I can't believe this is happening because I told you I couldn't get off," Neil said.

Todd laughed and wiped some tears from under his eyes. "It's okay. I can handle the rejection. You don't have to worry about it."

"It's not—I'm not rejecting you," Neil said, "I'm... this is bad for you, alright? Romantically, all I have ever done is hurt you."

"It was never on purpose," Todd tried.

"I don't give a shit," Neil said in an angry outburst of bottled up resentment at himself, "I still did. I still hurt you and I let you down and that is the last thing I have ever wanted to do." He looked at Todd. "I'm so glad you like me, but I wish you didn't."

"What?"

"I'm bad for you," Neil repeated.

"You're the best thing that's ever happened to me."

Neil shook his head. "No."

"Yes," Todd insisted, then he pushed himself up off the ground and

started turning around, looking for somewhere to go. "Okay, I can *not* do this right now."

Neil stood up right after him and grabbed his shoulders. "Then don't do it right now. Let's just go back to doing our homework."

"Doing our—you think I can go back to doing homework after *that!?"* Todd hissed and gestured viciously at the floor. "After hearing you say that—that I shouldn't like you and you... that you're gonna stop being my friend—"

"No, no! How many times do I have to tell you?" Neil asked, "Never. I will *never* stop being your friend."

"You are sure making it fucking seem like it!" Todd shouted, "You have a track record with this shit, Neil! I can't trust you—I—I can't! How am I supposed to *trust you?"*

"So you *don't* trust me?" Neil was hurting inside at this admission. It hurt twice as bad as the first time he had deduced it because Todd wasn't on his side this time.

"No, I don't think I do," Todd shook his head, "I can't be around you right now, Neil."

Todd tried to leave, but Neil grabbed his wrist. "No, don't leave. Please."

"Why not?"

"Because if you leave, you're not going to come back," Neil said, "I know because... I would do the same thing."

"Why the *fuck* would you say that?"

"I'm being honest," Neil said, "If I left, I would probably convince myself to run away and never come back. I'm not going to let you do that."

"You need to let go of me," Todd said calmly, "You need to let me leave, and you need to trust that I'm going to come back."

"Are you?"

"I need to collect my thoughts," Todd said, "But I'll always come back, and I can only hope you'll be here when I do."

"I will be."

"Then prove it," Todd said simply and shook Neil off of him, walking out of the door. Neil fell back to the ground and nearly started sobbing, and he barely knew why. Todd *liked* him, but Todd didn't trust him, and he'd already hurt him so bad. Everything was the opposite of how he wanted it to be. It was exactly the reason he wanted to avoid liking Todd in the first place, but he just couldn't resist, and now he was in this problem. He could never have Todd, but he would never lose him. But for as long as Todd still didn't believe a word he said, he would still be hurting him, so he needed to prove himself.

So he sat there in their room and didn't take a step out until Todd came back.

Chapter End Notes

I—
listen besties i just wanted to have a fun little sexual chapter in here bc teenage boys and hormones and this is what i ended up doing this is what it led to we started moving too fast

...

hope you guys still like it tho!!!!!!!!!!

Freshman Year—Zodiac

Chapter Summary

Neil is learning, and the Danbury's throw a Christmas party.

Chapter Notes

hello babies!! :)) i sincerely apologize for the wait so i wrote a longer chapter (6500 words) for you

!!potential spoilers for "the great gatsby" by f. scott fitzgerald (sorry my own story was giving me gatsby vibes so i decided to turn it into a plot point lol)

as per usual i did not edit, just wrote and posted, so pls excuse any mistakes <33

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil pretended like it hadn't happened, but that was only because Todd was pretending it hadn't happened either. They weren't acting *normal* with one another by any means. There was no casually sitting on each other's beds or fiddling with one another's fingers. None of that. Absolutely not. But in the same regard, it wasn't like they were discussing daily how they liked each other. It wasn't normal, but it wasn't entirely weird. It was something in between, and until Neil figured out what the hell he was going to do, he wanted it to stay that way. He had no idea what was going through Todd's mind, which was part of the problem. He used to always know what was going on in Todd's mind. In a way, he still did. He knew the basic stuff. But nothing deep, and certainly nothing that would help him. He lacked on telling Charlie about what had happened, but he assumed Todd must've because he got one hell of a lecture.

Neil didn't understand why Charlie was yelling at him so much. It wasn't like he'd *rejected* Todd. He said he couldn't do it, and Todd did too. It was a mutual understanding, but Charlie seemed to be under the impression that this was all Neil's fault. What Charlie didn't get is that no matter what, Todd was always honest with Neil. He kept secrets from him, he avoided questions, but when it came to direct answers, Todd never told a lie. Never. So if Todd was hurt by the fact that Neil didn't want to date him (which he did, in theory, but in execution it wouldn't have gone well), he would've said so. Todd was

hurt because Neil was the ghost of a best friend. He didn't tell Todd anything, didn't treat him like a normal human being, and babied him beyond belief. And Todd had told him all of that.

Of course Neil thought Todd was perfect, and that was exactly the problem, he'd discovered. For a couple of weeks after the incident, Neil was being stubborn and was stuck on his own idea that he treated Todd the same as everybody else. That Todd was exactly who Neil thought he was. Then they started reading *The Great Gatsby* in English class. It wasn't a freshman-level book to be analyzing by any means, plus Neil had already read it and he hadn't drawn much from it the first time. A couple of morals, maybe. Love, death... and mob relations occasionally, he supposed. Todd had always seemed to connect to it more than Neil ever had, and when they started doing assignments on it, Neil finally understood why.

Neil never liked Gatsby. The person, not the book. Neil thought he was creepy and pushy and spent way too much time fantasizing. He though Gatsby should leave Daisy alone because she wasn't exactly the best, either, and Gatsby was a nice enough fellow to deserve at least a little bit better. He never understood why Gatsby kept trying, why Gatsby decided to take the fall for Daisy, why Gatsby ever did *anything* for Daisy when she was truly an atrocious person at times. During English class with Mr. Keating, he got it. Gatsby didn't like Daisy, he liked who he thought Daisy was, and that was exactly what Todd was talking about.

Sure, in some ways it was true. Todd was shy and closed-off... in fifth grade. He needed Neil to be his voice in casual situations three years ago, but not anymore, but Neil liked feeling needed, so he continued to believe that Todd still needed help. Sometimes it was helpful, like when Neil got Mr. Keating's eyes off of him during class, but not when Todd was trying to have a conversation with Knox or Charlie... people he'd known forever and had had plenty of conversations with. When Todd was eleven and twelve, he needed Neil's company every second of every day because he just couldn't be alone, but now Neil wouldn't leave him alone. And when he did, it was when he didn't want him to. Neil was terribly bad at reading the room, and terribly bad at keeping up with the new person Todd was growing to be.

In sixth grade, Todd would've gagged and punched Charlie for a vaguely inappropriate joke. But now he was fifteen, and he didn't need Neil to cover his ears when Charlie or Knox said the word 'penis.' Neil had placed Todd in a box and walked away from it with hope he'd stay in there, but Todd had left the box. He'd left the whole warehouse

the box was being kept in, and Neil had been paying no attention. He was on a really long lunch break. But he'd just clocked back in. Todd was still *Todd*. Of course, he was, but he had changed. Neil had changed. Everyone and everything was changing, and Neil's mindset needed to change with it too. Todd wasn't a baby. Todd could take care of himself. Todd was responsible for his own feelings, and Neil's 'valiant' effort of not dating him to protect him was completely immature.

Todd could control his own emotions. Neil was an asshole for thinking him simply existing would ruin Todd's life somehow. He needed to shut up and listen. Todd never told a lie. If Todd didn't want him around, he'd of said so last week when Neil asked the question in the dark right before bed. Neil *had* hurt Todd, but it was because of things he'd actually done. He'd ignored him and put him in a *stupid box* and Todd did not like being put in a box, it turned out. Neil slapping Todd across the face would hurt him, Neil telling him the truth wouldn't. Manipulating Todd's feelings to use as an advantage would hurt him, confessing a crush wouldn't. Keeping a secret from everyone wouldn't hurt him, but keeping it from *just* him would, and it had.

Neil hadn't been a best friend, he'd been a babysitter. He'd been babysitting a kid whose parents would probably pay him to stop. He needed to work on reading rooms and treating Todd like an actual human being, so he read *The Great Gatsby* about seven times over the next month as an example what to *not* do. Look *into* the green light, not through it. It made him feel horrible at first, but he prioritized some little things for himself. He took the top drawer of the bedside table to hold his books because— while Todd liked keeping his books under his pillows—he had offered Todd the storage space anyway, even if he himself needed it more. Even if he had to go all the way to his desk to grab a book instead of just keeping in the drawer because he couldn't *stand* having anything under his pillows. It practically gave him nightmares. So he gave Todd the drawer he didn't need and walked across the room to get his books. Why? Todd didn't need that, let alone had he asked Neil to do it for him.

And Neil swore that Todd noticed him trying and his improvement. He hoped, at least, that the smile that Todd smiled when he found all his books once again back under his pillow was for Neil. Maybe it wasn't, but Neil was too afraid to ask.

In terms of a relationship, Neil hadn't quite figured it out. He wanted Todd in more ways than one, but he knew better. He wasn't in any place for a relationship. He barely knew himself and he was so

immersed in his own life he hadn't watched his friends develop or change or talked about their problems at all. In other words, he needed to care for himself more than he cared for Todd and care about his friends' lives more than he cared about his own. It was a difficult balance to learn, especially for a fifteen year old who had gotten into this situation because he jacked off. He was fifteen, he was bound to be immature, there was always going to be room for improvement, but that didn't mean he shouldn't try. That meant he needed to be his best if he expected to get anything he wanted out of life.

Obviously Neil had a problem with expectations. His father had instilled that fear within him if nothing else, and putting this pressure on himself to be "his best" wasn't really helping him out, so he was still going through a rough time. He still waited for everyone to be done in the showers so he could go cry and he still stayed awake at night staring at the ceiling thinking about the inevitable doom of his future. But he was trying, and he was attempting to convince himself that was all that mattered.

So, anyway, that was a very, very, very, very, *very* long way of saying that Neil had told his friends that they each had a *Neil coupon.* Anything they wanted to do, Neil would be there to do it with them. He could only back out if he had a test, was failing classes, or for some reason wasn't allowed to by his father. Of course, every coupon was refundable, so if they weren't satisfied with Neil's service, they'd get to try again, but at that point his friends took mercy on him. He had joined Charlie and Knox for every single soccer challenge they could do ever before their field got covered in snow for Knox's coupon and he had helped Charlie come up with an entire bulletin board of theories to why Knox wasn't paying him any attention anymore for his. Meeks had requested for Neil to come on a dangerous mission into town to gather supplies for another contraband radio and Cameron wanted Neil to sit in on a debate with him, which Neil reluctantly did. Pitts needed help with a Christmas present for Meeks that his smart roommate could not possibly predict before Christmas. Todd hadn't used his, and Ginny... well, Ginny was using it to her advantage...

"Is the costume necessary during the decorating process?" Neil asked his friend who was standing at the top of a large ladder hanging glittering tinsel from the ceiling. Ginny laughed at him loudly when she looked down and saw him in full elf costume holding the ladder for her. "I could let go of this right now."

Ginny wrapped her arms around the top of the metal as Neil shook the

ladder to prove that he meant it. She laughed out, "Okay, stop! And, yes." Ginny started going slowly down the ladder, and Neil wasn't sure if it was because she was actually done or she had really become scared that Neil was going to kill her. She straightened the bow on the top of his elf suit. "Gets you in the spirit, doesn't it?"

She shoved extra tinsel in his hands and walked behind him. He turned around to say, "It actually gets me in the opposite of that."

"How about you shut it, Twinkles, and help me find some gossamer?"

Neil looked down at the right side of his chest where a stupid elf name-tag was safety-pinned. "The name tag was a nice touch. I'll give you that."

"I think this whole thing was a nice touch," She said, "Come on."

She led them both to the garage and on the way Neil had to duck under several, various Christmas decorations. Neil thought Ginny was exaggerating when she said she needed help decorating a huge Christmas party, but Neil should've known better than to think Ginny was *ever* exaggerating. He was hit in the face with a bell as Ginny opened the door to the garage and strode in to locate another box of decorations. Neil untied the bell from the door which it was on and threw it across the garage. "Remind me why you're going so overboard again?"

Ginny didn't turn around, instead pulling a large plastic gingerbread man out of a box. She looked at it a bit before answering. "Because I'm me." She shook her head and tossed it back in the box. She pulled reindeer ears out next and placed them on her head. "Isn't that reason enough?"

"Nearly," Neil replied, "If I didn't feel so much like there's more."

She donned a red nose. "What ever more could there be?"

"You tell me," He answered, "But if I had to guess I'd say you're throwing this party to impress someone."

Ginny's skin tone matched the shade of her new nose. "What? Why would you say that?"

"It's a guess."

She stormed up to him and grabbed his collar, and Neil made a mental

note than even as a reindeer Ginny Danbury was terrifying. "*What do you know*?"

"Nothing you haven't told me," Neil responded, trying his best to remain calm. She could smell fear. He pointed behind her to another box on a different shelf. "I see gossamer."

She dropped him and walked over to the box, pulling out long pieces of the mentioned gossamer before urging Neil out of the garage and back into the kitchen. She tossed some bundles to Neil and started weaving her own bundles around the objects strewn about her kitchen counter. "It's not just my party. It's a *Danbury* Christmas party."

"Oh, so Chet's friends are coming?" Neil pushed, "Which one are you into? I like Luke. He smells good."

"Sorry?" Ginny looked up at him. "You what?"

"It's not creepy," Neil defended immediately, "I happened to smell him when I was over once. It wasn't deliberate."

Ginny considered this and then tilted her head. "Fair enough, but no."

"Is it one of my friends?" Neil asked and twiddled with his gossamer. "Is it Charlie?"

"No." She stood on her tip-toes and threw some decorations on top of her cabinets and fridge. "But Charlie knows."

"What?!" Neil exclaimed, "You told *Charlie* and not me."

She looked over her shoulder with a venomous look, and Neil instantly ate his words. What. A. Hypocrite. Once she saw the regret, she turned back around and looped fabric through her fridge handle. "Yes. I did. Some secrets are better suited for Charlie than you."

"Oh, yeah? How?"

"Well, when he has a crush on the person who has a crush on who you have a crush on..." Ginny started and Neil was instantly trying to put puzzle pieces together as soon as she revealed more and more information. "It helps to know that your motivations are aligned."

Neil rolled his eyes. "If this is about him and Knox I know *all* about it, and you absolutely shouldn't be encouraging his logic. Listen, I love him, but he is not a commitment type person right now, and that's

what Knox wants, but Charlie isn't focused on what Knox wants. Just what he wants. So I'm trying to convince him to let Knox adventure right now instead of getting him caught up in the Dalton Tornado again." While he was ranting, he ended up beautifully decorating the kitchen island. Ginny whipped around to say something in anger, but it dissipated for a second when she saw the sudden spark of interior designing talent from her friend. Neil put his hands on his hips. "So?"

The angry look returned to her face and she stormed up and swiped gossamer out of Neil's hands. "Well, then Knox can like someone else. Just not Chris."

"Okay, but if you're helping Charlie—" Neil paused and looked over at Ginny, who was standing still in a silent, horrified realization that she had made a mistake. "I'm sorry. *Huh?"* He didn't remember Ginny jumping on him, but she must've because soon they were on the ground and she was sitting on his chest with her hands covering his mouth.

"Not a word, got it?" She leaned down to his face, "Not a fucking word."

Neil ripped her hand off his face by her elbow and screamed, "The party is for her!"

"What did I just say!"

"I'm more inclined to listen to directions from people who aren't on top of me."

"So you're *not* a bottom?"

"*What?"*

Ginny climbed off of him and wiped off her pants. "Forget it. Forget this whole thing!"

"Not a chance!" Neil jumped up and disappeared into the garage for a few seconds. Soon he was pushing the ladder from the living room closer to the kitchen archway, then he climbed halfway up it and tacked a green plant to the wall. Ginny had no idea what he was doing until she walked through the ladder (pinching Neil's ankle when he said she was gonna have bad luck for seven years) and looked up. Neil smiled the biggest smile. "Like it?"

"I'd like it if you fell off that ladder."

Neil skipped down happily. He hadn't experienced one of his friends having a crush in a while. Of course there was Charlie and Knox but that was less exciting. Neil had no opportunity to be a wing-man that time. This was it. He squeezed Ginny tightly. "Ah! Young love!"

She shoved him. "Why did you turn into the Fairy Godmother?"

"Did you get her anything for Christmas?"

"I mean, I did, but don't—" Neil squealed and Ginny slapped a hand over his mouth. "That. Don't *that*. Can you not make it a big deal please?"

"Fine," Neil said after pushing her hand away from his mouth. "Promise you I won't, but if you don't at least *try* to get her under that mistletoe you and I are going to have some problems."

"Don't we already?" Ginny asked herself as she walked away and back into the kitchen.

The turn in events gave Neil an optimistic happiness before the party started. He barely cared he was in an elf suit as he finished the decorating and locked the doors that Ginny told him to, with special emphasis on the first floor bathroom. Charlie had ruined that for everybody. He helped Ginny set up some snacks on the coffee table and tried not to start a fight when Chet made a comment about the tightness of his elf pants. Thankfully, Ginny had some mercy and located a larger size of elf pants because apparently the girl was stocked up in elf apparel. He plugged in some lights that trailed around the Danbury's windows and then stood up, screaming when a face met him in the window. After calming down, he saw Chris's apologetic expression and rushed to the front door to let her in.

"So sorry, Neil!" She yelled and then looked him up and down, lingering a little on the elf hat. "*So* sorry, Neil."

He glared at her and grabbed the packaged hot chocolate she was holding before heading into the kitchen. He met Ginny in there and Chris followed him in, so he tried to get them both under the archway, but Ginny viciously resisted, so he gave up. Chris grabbed the box of hot chocolate from the floor where Neil had dropped it while getting shoved by Ginny and shoved it on the top of the fridge. Then she turned and leant against it, gesturing toward Neil's outfit. "Is this some kind of punishment?"

"I rather consider it a favor," Ginny responded, and she was so

nonchalant and normal. It was no wonder Neil hadn't detected her crush before. Wow. Imagine being able to be normal around the person you liked. Neil couldn't imagine. He wouldn't know. "He's free from the hellscape at seven."

"Seems harsh."

"I want him to greet the guests."

Neil whipped his head up. "You *never* said anything about that!"

"Did I not?" Ginny picked up a bell from her counter and shoved it into his hands. "Oops."

So there Neil was standing on the Danbury's doorstep, freezing his balls off in his tight elf costume, ringing his stupid little bell, and getting laughed at by every high school student who came up to the door. Well, at least he wasn't sitting inside around the TV and watching Christmas VCR's. Obviously that was far more embarrassing than the situation he was currently in. No way would he rather be in there eating kettle corn and drinking hot chocolate. No, sir. Not Neil. He was perfectly content with his little job as the designated elf for bell ringing.

Seven couldn't have come any sooner.

Unlucky for him, seven is when his friends arrived, so they got to see the elf costume in it's full glory before Neil had the opportunity to change. The cackling laughter was taunting and he was just glad they didn't have a camera. Todd waited for him outside the forbidden first floor bathroom and cast him a piteous look as he re-locked the door with elf costume in hand. He refused to make eye contact. "I don't want to talk about it."

"To be honest..." Todd started and picked the hat Neil had dropped up off the ground and delicately set it atop the pile in Neil's arms. "Me either." Neil tossed the costume in a nearby hall closet and wiped his hands off on his pants as if he had just finished gathering a pile of dirt. Todd reached into his pocket and pulled something out. "Here."

Neil looked down to what was in his friend's hands and noticed the white stub of a cigarette. He barely thought about it before snatching it and putting it in his mouth, but when it was there, he remembered something. With the cig dangling from his lips he said, "You don't like when I smoke."

Todd pulled a lighter out of his other pocket and held his hand up to the cigarette as a shield while he lit it with his other hand. "I admire when you need one."

Neil inhaled deeply and exhaled, waving away the smoke while coughing to hopefully rid of any potential lingering smell. "You just carry extra ones around in your pockets for me?"

"Sometimes," Todd admitted, but quickly turned it into a joke once Neil acknowledged the blush on his face. "Mostly when you're hanging out with Ginny because that's usually when you need one the most."

"Not wrong," He held out the cigarette to his friend in a questioning gesture.

"You don't like when I smoke," Todd mimicked him.

"I'm being courteous."

"With a cigarette *I* gave you."

"Do you want a drag or not?"

"I'm not rude enough to smoke in someone's house during their Christmas party."

"Oh *shut* up." Neil took another drag and blew it all right in Todd's face. Todd glared at him and waved away the smoke. "Rude of me, isn't it?"

"You're a pain."

Neil smiled. "Well, absolutely." Suddenly the cigarette was snatched from his mouth and Charlie appeared leaning against the wall as if that was his natural position and he'd just teleported in like that. Half the cigarette was gone with the drag he took and Neil didn't even bother to take it back. Neil and Todd shared a quick look and then Neil asked, "Fuck's up with you?"

"Withdrawal," Charlie responded, then tried to hand the cigarette, which was practically a stub, back to Neil. "Sorry, did you want it back?"

"You can keep it." Neil rolled his eyes and tried to turn back to Todd, but Todd was gone.

Here's a secret: Neil didn't really like parties. He thought maybe going

to some would make him feel normal, but it actually just made him feel like crap. Turned out he didn't like being surrounded with a bunch of noisy teenagers he barely—or didn't—knew. It must've been the boarding school kid in him, but he wanted to yell at all of them to use their inside voices. There were too many things going on at once and Neil could barely comprehend the radio playing while he was trying to do his homework. With permission, he wandered up to Ginny's room and closed the door behind him. He wandered about, using his movement as an attempt to distract himself from the loudness downstairs. He ended up at Ginny's bedside table where there was a picture of him, her, and Sam. Neil had printed that picture for her birthday because she missed Sam. He tried his best to hang out with her as much as possible, but he thought his father was nearly on the brink of telling him to break up with her and focus on school—because, of course, he definitely thought they were dating.

He sighed and laid the picture face down before sitting on Ginny's bed and sighing again while rubbing over his face. Man. Fuck high school. He looked over at Ginny's loaded bookshelf and absentmindedly started reading over the titles. He didn't really care about the spines of books, he just wanted to keep his mind occupied. Any silent moments and he would think about Todd and wanting to throw away his whole self improvement kick to just kiss the boy, but he'd made several oaths with himself. One being that self-improvement was necessary if he ever really wanted to properly court Todd and another being that any intimate touch they shared—hugging, kissing, even *biting*—it had to have meaning behind it and it had to be special. He was not taking anything for granted anymore and he wasn't about to do anything in passing. Not until he knew it could be a consistent thing.

Luckily, he wasn't as horny as he used to be, so this touch starvation barely had any effect on him.

He stood up and pulled an astrology book out of Ginny's many books. He knew Ginny did a lot of research on astrology. Did Neil know what any of it meant? Not a clue. But reading the facts had the same thrill for him as getting his palm read at a state fair. None of it meant anything to him, but even if there was one slightly accurate fact, Neil would probably listen to his horoscope for the rest of his life. Ginny read hers every morning in the paper. She was a Libra, and she often tried to engage Neil in the subject, but memorizing that many traits and qualities based on birthdays was not his thing. He could barely remember birthdays period. Furthest Neil had gotten with this education was learning that the astrological signs were constellations. Constellations were something Neil could get behind—Todd liked

them—but not memorizing which ones were which. He knew one: Orion because it was simply three stars in a row. He could tell you nothing more than that except the fact he thought some astronomers had to be blind with what they shaped some stars as.

When he was at the bookshelf he glanced out the window and down into Ginny's backyard. There were a few people out there scurrying around in the dark, but Neil noticed Todd swinging on Ginny's bench-swing by himself with papers in his lap. It had been maybe ten minutes since Neil had seem him last, and he already looked comfortable enough to have been situated there on the swing for many years. Maybe even grant you some wisdom if you correctly answered a riddle. Neil held onto the astrology book and headed downstairs and out the back door, determined to see what Todd was doing with papers in the dark during a Christmas party.

The answer was an essay that Todd had opted out of doing the rest of the week and was doing last-minute, which was another thing about Todd. He was smart, but he wasn't as punctual and on top of it as Neil liked to hold in his ideal of him. Todd turned in things in the nick of time and procrastinated bad, and Neil was sure his encouragement of how Todd was full of integrity wasn't helping any. He was basically just encouraging him to keep not doing his work. Neil didn't even remember what the essay was supposed to be about, but he barely cared as he watched Todd write. He loved watching Todd write. No matter how frantic he was, it always came out nice.

"Ugh!" Todd suddenly groaned and erased a word for about the fifth time. "That's not the word. What's the word?"

Neil patted him on the shoulder. "Let me help." Todd gave him a look that really offended him. "Hey, I was in debate. MVP for two years. I know words."

"MVP for one year."

"Don't rub it in," Neil said, "Just let me help."

"Fine," Todd said, "There's a word for, like... unclear... morally unclear more than not. And I'm close! But I wrote down androgynous and then hydrogen so I'm about to give up."

"Ambiguous?" Neil offered.

Todd's eyes lit up. Neil loved it when they did that. "Yes. Yes! Ambiguous!" He said the word again as he wrote it down on the paper

and sighed heavily. He looked over at Neil. "I'm sorry for ever doubting you."

"You should be."

"What's that?" Todd sat up and pointed at the book in Neil's lap. Todd's eyesight in the dark was astounding.

"Oh." Neil picked it up. "Nothing. Ginny's astrology book."

"Mm," Todd said and looked back at his essay, "Tell me my horoscope, Apollo."

"When was your birthday again?"

"Not funny."

"Then don't talk about the god of prophecies in relation to horoscopes."

"They're predictions aren't they?"

"Prophecies aren't predictions!"

"Read me my horoscope, *Apollo,"* Todd repeated.

Neil huffed and flipped through the pages of the book. He knew Todd's star sign. They had look it up once. Their birthdays were only a week apart, so they thought they were going to be the same one, but nope. Neil was a Scorpio and Todd was a Sagittarius. Those words meant nothing to Neil most points of his life. But occasionally they meant things. He flipped through the whole book and looked at Todd. "The last horoscope stopped at 1945."

"Oh, too bad," Todd said dismissively, and his brain had definitely already moved on. "What's the word for... destined to end?"

"Sounds dramatic," Neil said and then sat on his hands while thinking because of the cold. "Inevitable?"

"No."

"Terminal?"

"Terminal," Todd repeated and snapped, writing it down in his essay.

Neil leaned over and tried to catch a glance of what Todd was writing,

but his handwriting was too light and it was too dark. Neil could barely make out the eraser marks from where Todd had scribbled out the word hydrogen. "Not good with words tonight or what?"

"Somehow screaming teenagers isn't the best background noise for thinking."

"Then allow me," Neil said and crossed his legs, coughing dramatically and opening up the astrology book again. "Care for some fun star sign facts?"

"God, why not," Todd said with a tone that signified he definitely already regretted the decision.

"Mm," Neil flipped through the pages, "*If you tell a Scorpio to do something, they will do the opposite of it."*

"Hmph," Todd laughed without looking up, "Sounds right."

Neil perked up an eyebrow. "Oh really? Well"—he turned some pages and landed on another section—"*Sagittariuses tend to be very impatient*."

"Shut it," Todd said and tried to swipe the book from him, but Neil stuck out a finger telling him to wait and stood up away from the swinging bench.

"*Sagittariuses are the best procrastinators.*"

"Am not!" Todd shouted, "Give me that!"

Neil kept the book well out of Todd's reach and looked down at his essay. "When's that due? Tomorrow? And when'd you start it? Today?"

"You're so—" Todd jumped and got the book out of Neil's hands. He ran away quickly and flipped the pages until he had yet again switched sections. "*Scorpios are exhausting to be around*."

"You're making that up!"

"Right there," Todd turned the book and pointed at the line which did, unfortunately, say that. "*Scorpios can be quite stubborn*." Todd was now hopping from garden box to garden box trying to keep the book away from Neil. "Not so nice when it's *you,* huh?" He flipped the page. "*Scorpios have a need for control*."

Neil snuck up behind him and snatched the book. "Alright, your turn." Todd didn't even try. He deserved some facts at this point. Just to

make them even. He flipped frantically. "I can't find anymore bad ones!"

"Guess I'm just better," Todd said.

"Mm?" Neil questioned, "*Sagittariuses flirt a lot*—oo!"

"You know good and well I do *not*!"

"*Clumsy, arrogant*... have yet to see a lie."

Todd finally ripped the book back into his own hands and looked down to the page Neil had landed on, ready to find any amazing Sagittarius fact, but instead he stopped. "Hey, look at that. *Sagittariuses and Scorpios are incompatible*."

"Less fun," Neil stated.

"Did you see that one?"

"I did."

"So you *have* seen a lie."

Neil was about to say something, but the words caught on his tongue out of nerves and also out of feeling something cold land on his skin. He looked down and saw the last of a snowflake melting on his arm. Todd was concerned about his silence until he looked up and saw the white flurries floating down from the night clouds. Neil stuck his tongue out and caught one, making eye contact with Todd and raising his eyebrows as if it was some great trick before closing his mouth. Todd tried the same, but two flurries landed right in his eyes and Neil could only laugh at him.

"Are you even looking?" Neil asked.

"You have to *look?*"

"Oh, my god," Neil said. He threw his head back and caught another snowflake on his tongue. Looking back at Todd he said, "Easy." Todd tried again and only ended up with a wet spot on his nose. Neil, once again, could only laugh at him as he stepped closer and extended his sleeve to wipe off Todd's nose. "You're stupid."

"Yeah, so are you," Todd fired back and looked up at him, catching sight on a snowflake caught in Neil's eyelash. He leaned up and blew it out, only explaining what he had done after Neil had already gone

through multiple stages of confusion about Todd blowing on his eye. "That's probably a wish or something."

"Oh, yeah, *sure."*

"Hey, take your wish opportunities."

"Alright," Neil said, "I wish that I never get to kiss you."

Any fun Todd was having completely drained out of his body was immediately replaced with butterflies of confusion at that statement, but all Neil could perceive was silence, and Neil never thought silence was good. But then Todd said, "You're not... supposed to say your wishes out loud. Then they won't—I mean—They it won't come true."

"I know." After a couple more moments—that felt like hours—of silence, Neil pointed over to the bench. "Grab your essay before it gets wet. I can make us hot chocolate and meet you inside."

"Y—Yeah, I mean, yes... sure." Todd turned on his heel and walked toward the bench, and as soon as he couldn't see Neil's face anymore, it turned completely red. Neil had not yet learned to think before he spoke, so he took this opportunity to reprimand himself for it. They hadn't talked about it for weeks, and he was just going to bring it up at *the Danbury's Christmas Party!?* Well, Todd had started the whole compatibility thing. Neil was just following in suit. Right? He rushed inside and prepared hot chocolate. Picking up an essay and following him inside did not take that long, but he knew Todd was probably standing outside and recovering from the whiplash that Neil had just delivered. The party had calmed down and Neil was the only one in the kitchen, give or take Charlie and Ginny in the corner, but they barely looked awake, so Neil wasn't going to count them. They were having a silent conversation with their eyes, and based on the fact Neil could see Knox sitting on the other side of a couch where Chet and Chris were sitting to one another, he could guess any plan Charlie and Ginny had come up with had not worked out for them.

He plopped some marshmallows into each of the drinks and heard the sliding glass door close. He decided to just meet Todd out there because he suddenly felt uncomfortable being alone in the kitchen with Ginny and Charlie. They ran into each other in the archway of the kitchen and Neil took a solid ten seconds to recover from almost spilling the hot chocolate. The *manly* gasps the two of the let out woke up Charlie and Ginny and the two looked over. Charlie dismissed it when he saw it was just his two idiot friends, but Ginny's eyes

widened and she locked eye with Neil, who didn't understand why she looked so frantic until she nodded her head above him. Neil handed Todd his cup as he realized what was above them. What *he* had put there. For Ginny. To get her to kiss Chris. Neil thought that maybe if he didn't look up, Todd wouldn't notice.

"You think Charlie and Ginny were waiting in here hoping their *beloveds* would walk through the door and they could trap them under the mistletoe?" Todd asked nonchalantly sipping his hot chocolate, but Neil saw the liquid quivering.

Neil was breathing incredibly heavily. "I wouldn't doubt it. Even if Charlie is Jewish." Charlie's head barely moved at the mention of his name.

"Breath, would you, Neil?" Todd said, "S'just a stupid Christmas tradition."

Neil let out a very shaky laugh. "Rich coming from you. Your hot chocolate is shaking."

"No, stupid, *I'm* shaking."

"That was my point," Neil responded, and he wasn't really sure where to take the situation, so he let his dumb mouth act faster than his brain. "I still like you, you know."

"I figured," Todd responded, "You took the top drawer."

"I did."

"I still like you too," Todd said, "And it's very overwhelming to think about. And I would not like to think about it anymore."

"Yeah, no," Neil agreed, "I would love to not think about it either."

"So we can pretend this didn't happen?"

"I mean, nothing's really happened."

And, oh, did Neil have a really bad tendency of eating his words.

"'Well, not yet." Todd leaned up and kissed Neil's cheek in a second, but it felt like hours to Neil. He saw the blue in Todd's eyes change as he made the decision to do it, he saw his face soften with that expression that was only for Neil, he felt Todd's hand on his shoulder helping him gain the height, and he felt Todd's lips on his cheeks.

They weren't soft. They hadn't been when they had kissed years ago either. Todd's lips were always chapped. He was always biting them. Because he was anxious and worried all the time and a procrastinator who was lucky he got his work turned in on time. He wasn't an innocent, helpless baby. He was impatient and clumsy and arrogant. He wasn't perfect.

And that's the thing Neil needed to learn to love about him.

Chapter End Notes

thank you all for your incredible patience <3. it's been rough lately and i have had a lot going on. nonetheless, i hope this update made y'all happy, and i love you all. :)

Freshman Year—PeeksMitts Week

Chapter Summary

It's PeeksMitts week, which means anything can happen!

Chapter Notes

a fat almost 10,000 words for you guys to make up for absence. once again, did not edit just threw it up. and this one is HEAVY

cw// homophobic themes, themes of sexual harrassment/assault, smoking, angst, misogynistic themes/language

tw// homophobic language/slurs, sexual harrassment/assault

i do believe that's it, if that's too much for you guys, i understand and will put a summary at the end

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“All I’m saying, Neil, is that my birthday is this week and I deserve a good grade on this English project.” Pitts was in Neil and Todd’s room sitting on Neil’s bed. Neil was standing in the middle of the room, and Meeks was on Todd’s bed on the other side. (I’m sure you can already presume what kind of situation was going on from this kind of set up). Right when Meeks was about to burst out with a response, Neil held his finger up and gave him a look. He wasn’t the Debate team MVP for nothing if not for knowing how to shut others up when it wasn’t their turn to speak. Meeks muttered something under his breath about how Pitts prefaced his sentence with *all I’m saying,* so clearly he was finished, but Neil shushed him again. Pitts smirked at Meeks like he had won something, but all he really won was a slap from Neil. He coiled back. “Hey! What was that for?”

“For being an idiot,” And before Meeks could laugh Neil turned to him and continued, “You too! What is wrong with you guys! Why are you asking *me* who can be Todd’s partner for this project?”

”Well, cause…” Meeks started, “We figured you’d want him, but I need a good grade. It’s my birthday this week too!” Ah, yes. PeeksMitts week. Neil’s favorite time of the year. He liked celebrating his friends’ birthdays, but Meeks and Pitts pulled more ‘because it’s my birthday!’ cards than anyone else. Even Charlie. They had a whole week after all, didn’t they? They could complain and whine all they

wanted, couldn't they? Neil couldn't relate. He was part of the 'keep my birthday a secret' committee, and he hadn't even done so very successfully. He was caught up in these thoughts before he fully processed what Meeks had said. When he did, he just stared at them again.

"You guys realize I have no control over who Todd partners with, right?"

"Well, when you tell him who to work with he usually listens."

"Yeah!" Pitts agreed, "He listens to you like you're God. So I *pray* that you let him work with me."

"Gerard!"

"Oh, shove it!" Pitts yelled at his roommate. "At least Welkin likes you!"

"Keating liked you!"

"Keating liked everybody!"

That was another problem. Mr. Keating had been moved to the older grades to teach English. Apparently his lessons weren't suitable for freshman boys, so they replaced him with Mr. Kelp Welkin. Yes, his real name was Kelp, and yes he was an old man that Neil was sure was generated in some sort of hidden Welton basement. Seriously, 'Welton' and 'Welkin'? That was too close of a rhyme as far as Neil was concerned. He'd never been more sure of an artificial person before. The only good thing about him was that Charlie called him 'whale food' and his brain was too slow to process that the derogatory nickname was his.

Pitts was right, though. Welkin favored Meeks way more than any of the other boys. He thought Charlie was a troublemaker, Pitts was stupid, Knox was a spoiled rich boy, Cameron was a kiss-ass, Todd was a lost cause, and Neil was somewhere between average and boring. Of course, he was wrong. Todd wasn't a lost cause, but everything else was pretty much spot on. Meeks was the only one of their friend group that was smart on a first impression. It took ten meetings with Charlie to even realize he had a brain in his head, and far more than that to find out that sometimes he used it. Sometimes. However, when it came to English, everyone knew that was Todd's forte. Even if Neil was the only one who knew that Todd enjoyed poetry and reading Shakespeare, everyone knew he excelled at writing

essays and literary analysis. Naturally, everyone wanted to be his partner when it came to English projects, especially a project about Romeo and Juliet, a Shakespearean play. Neil had no idea who he wanted to partner with. He had to be the only one of his friends that *didn't* want to be with Todd. He actually wanted a good grade on this project and Todd's passion for poetry and Shakespeare was what made Neil fall for him in the first place. He considered it a major distraction.

Almost as if on cue with Neil's thoughts, Meeks eyes widened and he said, "You weren't planning on partnering with him, were you? That'd be too much of a distraction for you! I mean… the both of you!"

"Thanks." Neil deadpanned.

Pitts said, "He's right."

And again Neil said, "Thanks." He turned around, wishing Todd would come through the door and end his suffering. Apparently, he wasn't the only one who thought Todd couldn't make his own decisions. Now he was one of the only ones who did know. "I'm not actually relying on someone else for a good grade." Neil knew that both of his friends bit their tongues on a response that told him he didn't rely on anyone for anything ever, which was true. He didn't let himself. He had to know how to be the best at everything on his own, and it killed him that someone, even Todd, was better at him than something. It sounded like a total egotistical thing, but it was just another inherited trait from his father. Relying on other people was weak, and he couldn't be weak. He was already gay. The even bigger thing was, he needed a good grade on this project. His grade was teetering and he was blessed his father didn't already know about it.

Finally, the door opened and Todd walked in holding three different books and a set of keys. Neil didn't know why he had a set of keys, but the jingling added some domestic level to his arrival in the room. Kind of like they were in college already sharing a dorm, but Neil got rid of that thought as soon as he could. "Neil, have you seen my—" Todd stopped talking as he noticed the crowd in his room. He set his stuff down. "—Good pencil..?"

Neil reached behind Todd's ear and pulled out said pencil, handing it to him and trying to communicate with his eyes not to ask anything about what was going on. Todd understood this eye communication, but only obeyed it for a couple of seconds. "Thanks. What are you guys doing?"

Neil didn't want Todd to ask because he didn't want Todd to know his help was desired, he didn't want Todd to ask because he knew Pitts and Meeks didn't want to put the dreadful decision making up to him and they were going to 'act natural' to prevent it from happening. They both almost fell over like a ghost pushed them and Neil was inches away from facepalming. Meeks leaned his elbow on Pitts shoulder, an upward angle which should of dislocated his own, and coughed. "Nothing. Just asking Neil if he's free this Friday."

"He is," Todd said, "We all are. We have the same schedule and we already made plans." One new thing about Todd; he no longer tolerated any lies, and he was very aggressive and blunt about it. Neil admired it, and so did everyone else, as long as it wasn't against them. Neil had the brunt end of it most times, so it didn't surprise him as much, but Meeks and Pitts definitely had not, so their eyes widened like the ghost that had pushed them had just possessed Todd. Todd just raised an eyebrow. The both of them broke out into a sprint to leave the room, saying 'Neil can tell you' instead of 'goodbye.' Todd smiled a little when his friends left in fear, and it made Neil laugh. They laughed for a second before Todd asked, "So, what the hell was that about?"

"They both need a partner for the English project."

"Don't they have each other?"

"A *specific* partner," Neil clarified and stared at Todd, who pursed his lips.

"Oh," He said, "I see. Just them, you think?"

"Not at all," Neil responded, looking at the books Todd had placed on his desk. One was his science book, the other history, and the third was Gatsby. Neil smiled again, but tried to hide it. He didn't want Todd to ask him why he would possibly be smiling at a reminder of F. Scott Fitzgerald. As far as Todd knew, Neil hated that fucking book. "Knox and Charlie are probably next. Maybe Cameron depending on whether or not he got that 85 up from the test on Monday."

"Do you think that Welkin did this on purpose? This partner thing?" Todd asked, "But he actually thinks Meeks is the one going through this."

"Definitely," Neil agreed, "It's like- Well, one time Chris told me that sometimes when teachers assign seats in class, they sit two kids they think should date next to each other. This is just the all-boys boarding

school version of that."

"Hm," Todd thought, "Maybe Welkin is doing that too."

"Oh yeah, I bet he thinks Charlie and Cameron would be super cute together."

"I'd pay to see it."

"Ew," Neil said, "Gross."

"Not in a voyeuristic way, idiot," Todd pushed Neil's shoulder. "To see the fight it would descend into." He walked past Neil to straighten up his desk.

"Oh," Neil said as he turned around to follow Todd's movements. "Yeah, that'll do it, I guess. Who would you put together?"

Todd laughed at the question immediately. Pushing his copy of *The Great Gatsby* into his drawer, which Neil caught onto, by the way—we all know Todd keeps his books under his pillows—Todd said, "Charlie and Knox."

Neil snorted in response. If you walked into Charlie and Cameron's room and opened up their closet, the inside of the door would have what Charlie called "The Shape of Doom" taped on the inside of it. Written on the shape of doom were the names of Chris, Ginny, Knox, and Charlie himself, along with lines drawn between all of them. In his free time, Charlie opened the cabinet to stare at it and think of a plan to get Knox back, and if he had actually been smart enough to remember what a square was called, Neil would be a little more worried about it. Neil was sure Ginny probably had one of her own in her closet, but he chose not to think about it because fortunately Ginny couldn't do anything to Knox from where she was at Henley. Weirdly, that made Charlie have all the power in the situation, and Neil wasn't really worried about that. In general, he was worried that it was possible for *Charlie* to have *all* the power in any situation.

"So who are you going to partner with?" Neil asked Todd, sitting down on his bed now that it was finally free of his desperate friend. "Plenty of options."

Todd thought for a moment. Pitts and Meeks weren't entirely wrong to worry about forcing this decision upon Todd, they just handled it poorly. Neil knew *decisions* weren't really Todd's forte, but the only way he could get better at it was if Neil left him alone to decide things

himself. "I'm not sure. Who are you going to partner with?"

"I'll take anybody." Truly, Neil was about to say *whoever's left,* but that sounded a bit too mean, and he thought it would make Todd feel even worse. "I'm not particularly in high demand."

"Not for this, anyway."

"What?"

"What?" Todd said back, and then nervously laughed and threw open his Science book. "Nothing. What was the biology homework?"

—

For a strangely peaceful hour, Neil and Todd worked on their biology homework, which was nothing less than rigorous. There was something about Science teachers in general that made them all assholes, now employ them at Welton, and suddenly you had the worst of the worst. The last time Neil had fun in science was in third grade when all he had to do was aimlessly stab wires into a potato, now even stealing illegal parts for Pitts and Meeks' radio was anxiety-inducing and not fun at all. Maybe he was exaggerating. All they had to do was write notes, and in a weird way, Neil kind of liked copying things down. There was no original thought that had to go into it and the practice made him write better, but he got distracted when he looked over and saw Todd writing. Todd was good at a lot of things, but *especially* writing. Easily, he had the best handwriting in their entire class—maybe in the entire school—and Neil could watch him write for hours.

Todd knew this, and every time Neil would look over and watch his pencil move against the paper, he would, without looking away from his work, snap his fingers and point back at Neil's notebook. It was an efficient system, and Neil envied Todd for being able to read him so well. It wasn't necessarily a bad thing. It was just that it used to be a two-way thing, and Neil was no longer fluent in Todd as he was in him. But like his writing, practice made perfect, so he just kept trying. Right as they finished one of the assigned chapters, Charlie and Knox busted in. Now, Charlie wasn't one for subtleties, so Neil and Todd knew exactly what this was about the second they burst through the door.

Charlie opened with, "I'm failing, Todd. *Failing*."

"No, you're not," Todd responded.

Unfortunately, Charlie had anticipated this kind of response. "Well, English major. I didn't say failing *the class*. I'm failing at finding a suitable partner. I wandered all the way down the hall and found nobody!" Knox and Neil both rolled their eyes at these dramatic, but Todd, at the least, looked slightly entertained by it. "Would you be a dear, Toddsie, and put me out of my misery."

"Certainly not in the way I would like to."

"Is that a threat?"

"Yes." Knox pushed Charlie out of the way, and Neil was seconds away from penalizing them under debate rules, but he stopped himself when Todd gave him a look because *shit* Todd really did know him well. Debate pet peeves had been engrained into Neil even worse since he had gotten kicked off the team, and Todd was usually able to keep them in check. Neil needed to start a list of these kind of things and then add *that* list to the list of reasons he should've developed a crush on Todd earlier. "I tried to stop him from bothering you."

"What? So *you* could?" Todd asked, and now Neil was entertained. If nothing else, the trauma of their 'relationship' had given Todd the ability to be a human lie detector. Made sense for the only person that could ever tell anyone he cared about the truth. Todd looked over at him like this situation was a TV show and Neil was the audience, but then he looked back at Knox and Charlie and said, "Sorry. Neil's my partner."

And like a TV show, all of them said, "What?"

"Backstabbing bitch," Charlie muttered to Neil, who held his hands up in a questioning manner. Charlie took a comical breath. "Sorry, sorry. Uncalled for. You seem surprised by this decision. You have time to reject."

Todd looked at Neil again, and Neil couldn't decide if it was pleading or threatening, but either way he told Charlie no, and him and Knox left the room. Neil immediately turned to Todd. "I'm your what-now?"

"Partner. We're partners for this project, got it?" Todd said, holding eye contact with Neil for a second. "What? You didn't want to?"

"No! No, I— I did not say that."

"I know. I'm messing with you," Todd said, "I'm sorry. I just can't deal with any of them pretending they're not perfectly capable of doing this

themselves." He moved on and went back to biology notes, but Neil could not move on, so he scooted his chair next to Todd's and tapped his pencil on the pages of his biology book. "Question, Mr. Perry?"

"A couple, Mr. Anderson." Neil retorted.

"Shoot."

"They're there," Neil replied, "I didn't say I knew what they were."

"Oh, my bad for assuming."

Neil leaned back in his chair and stared at Todd. "Someone is in a mood today."

Todd glared at him from the side and then turned. "It's not a mood."

Neil laughed at him and his glasses fell down his nose. Todd glared at him and he pushed them back up, crossed his arms, and amusedly shook his head. "I didn't say it was a bad mood, Mr. Anderson."

"Stop, you sound so Nolan right now."

"Oh, sorry, sorry," Neil smiled, "It's a *cute* mood." Todd stopped moving for a second and turned to Neil, and Neil met his stare with as challenging a look he could muster. There was absolutely no confidence behind his words, but he was hoping the fact that he had flustered Todd would impair his ability to realize that.

After a semi-long silence, Todd said, "I guess you don't sound Nolan anymore."

"You *guess*?" Neil accentuated, "Should I be concerned?"

"Oh, shut up." Todd gave up on their biology homework endeavor, closing his book and paying full attention to the boy in front of him, which made Neil ten times more nervous than he already was. Neil thought maybe that meant they weren't going to talk about homework anymore, but Todd asked, "So... have you thought about any ideas for the project?"

"No, obviously not," Neil answered, "I didn't have a partner until two minutes ago."

"S'pose not." Todd twirled his pencil between his fingers, and for once Neil could read him. He was doing that so he didn't have to make eye contact with Neil. He never made eye contact with Neil for at least

twenty minutes after a compliment. The longest Todd had gone without eye contact was an hour, and Neil believed it was because the word 'hot' had been used in there somewhere. That was in seventh grade, though, when Neil was still oblivious to Todd's feelings for him, so that made sense. Regardless, Neil still found it endearing that Todd still got fidgety with his compliments after all these years. "So what's your excuse for these past two minutes?"

"I'm stupid?" Neil tried.

Todd smiled. "S'pose so."

Neil kicked Todd's leg. "Shut up. You're stupider."

"If I was, I don't think everyone'd be *begging* to be my partner."

"I'm *begging* you to shut up," Neil said, "I've been playing damage control with these idiots all day. Cameron even knocked on the door."

"Oh yeah?" Todd asked, "What'd you tell him?"

"To fuck off."

"Sounds about right."

—

Tuesday was when Todd had suddenly decided he and Neil were partners. By Friday, they were both wishing he hadn't made that decision, and it wasn't anything cute—because they were too in love to focus or something. It was because they couldn't agree on a single idea, and every conversation denigrated into an argument about how the other had no idea what they were dong. Every argument was followed by an apology for being so hot-headed, so their friendship wasn't suffering, but the time they had to spend working on the project was. It got worse when they discovered all their friends had an idea, and Knox tried to tell them it took him and Charlie (yeah, *they* were partners and it was working better than Neil and Todd) forever to come up with an idea. The prompt for the project was strange after all. "Mimic the plot and some of the dialogue of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and create a blunt project that exemplifies your understanding of the plot of the story." What did that even mean?

Every idea Neil or Todd had was either too little or too much, and it was so fun watching their suffering that Welkin didn't even suggest they choose different partners or switch to working individually. In

fact, he even said that it was now *against the rules* for a partner switch or to work alone, so Neil and Todd were stuck with Todd's impulse defense of choosing Neil as his partner so everyone would leave him alone. Everyone else thought it was super funny, but Neil and Todd were close to roommate switching because they couldn't partner switch. Eventually it got to the point where they couldn't even speak about the project to each other outside of designated times so they wouldn't kill each other in front of everyone.

They decided that if they didn't agree on an idea by Friday, they'd put all their best ideas in a jar, pick one out, and just do it. Neither of them wanted to do that because neither of them were even okay with the other's ideas enough to put them in the jar of possibilities, so they spent *even more* time trying to agree on something to do, and it proved even less useful than never talking about it at all. Friday, however, was the PeeksMitts week celebration, and they were going into town with Ginny to celebrate, so they decided to put it aside until after. To keep their thoughts to themselves the whole night as to not break into an argument, have one final discussion after it was done, and then presumably throw some ideas in a jar. Neil nor Todd had hope they would sort out an idea by the end of the night, but at least it was agreed between everyone that no one would talk about the project during the PeeksMitts week celebration.

Ginny met up with them at the Overstreet's, where Knox's driver—Mr. Holland, who the entire family endearingly called "Holly"—had agreed to drop them off somewhere in town and pick them up later. The Overstreets didn't know that their driver had agreed to leave the kids alone in town. They thought he was going to be with them the entire time, but Knox was a kid with a very enticing deal. He had made an agreement with Holly that had only worked because of two reasons. One: Meeks was always very nice to him, so when he found out half of the celebration was for Meeks, he was even more eager to make sure their event went well. Two: Holly would still be getting paid during the time the kids spent in town, but he could really be off spending time with friends and having a break. After Knox assured him it was practically impossible for the Overstreets to find out, Holly happily agreed to this arrangement and dropped them all off in town on Friday around four.

The first place they hit was the electronics store. Meeks and Pitts walked in like happy little children into a candy store, clutching onto their little dinky radio they'd had since fourth grade and walked up to the clerk to ask how they could optimize its capability. For this store, it was Charlie's job to keep Cameron from being a prick and Knox's to

actually speak to the clerk since Meeks and Pitts (who, notably, was taller than the electronic store clerk) were too nervous to do so. Since those two were occupied, it left Todd and Neil with Ginny, who was wearing Chet's brown leather jacket over a white sweater, a pink skirt, white stockings, and cute little black shoes. Given that neither of them knew how to dress themselves—Neil was in the same green sweater that he always wore to outings with Welton pants and Todd was wearing a shirt that made him shiver in the February cold—they complimented Ginny's ability to look cute and stay warm.

Right in the middle of her accepting the compliment and scolding Todd for his shirt, she noticed something behind her friends and stepped back, extending her sleeves beyond her hands and crossing her arms over her chest. Neil wasn't really too good at reading people, but Todd was, so he turned over his shoulder, which caused Neil to follow, and they both noticed a boy in a letterman's jacket standing near the guitars in the back of the store. They both looked back at Ginny and switched specialties—while Todd could notice things, Neil could vocalize them. "Do you know him?"

"I think he's on the football team with Chet," Ginny muttered, "Or an opposing team or something. I've seen him at football games." Going out with Ginny was always a different experience for them. Most of the time Ginny wasn't just Ginny—to a lot of people she was "Chet Danbury's sister." When people recognized her as this in public, in true Ginny fashion, she always made it a point to pretend like she didn't even know Chet or go off on them about how she was her own person, but with this guy she didn't seem to be anticipating his approach. It was unusual, but then again, most of the people who approached them in public were either younger than them or female. This guy was definitely... well, a guy, and much, much older at that. A Junior at the least, but Neil had an inkling he was a Senior.

Todd nudged Neil's side with his own, and once he got his attention, he used his eyes to gesture to Ginny covering herself. Neil glared in thought, but then in pure hatred. "Has he bothered you before?"

"Just shouted some stuff across the bleachers," Ginny said and tucked some hair behind her ear. Neil wanted to turn around and punch the guy square in the face now, but he knew better than to fight Ginny's fights for her. "Once we leave, we should be fine."

"And you'd let us know otherwise?" Neil asked.

"Obviously, but it's fine," She assured, "This stuff just kinda happens

when you're a girl in public. You can't have a good time."

"Well, you're gonna have a good time."

"Oh, I know," She said, and her usual Ginny tone was buried within the words, so it calmed Neil down.

Their next stop was a small, local drink place that Ginny assured them was the best around. She covered the bill for Meeks and Pitts, and Knox was forced to cover everyone else with a faint promise that he'd get paid back. The total for him was only around twenty dollars, though, so he wasn't entirely worried about it. Both Todd and Neil, because they felt so bad about using Knox's money, (despite making fun of him for being "spoiled" one-hundred percent of the time) almost both opted out of getting a drink, but Knox talked them into getting at least one drink and sharing. Neil let Todd pick, but only because he was the pickier one out of the two and Neil didn't care what it was that he drank, but when he sucked on the straw and tasted coconut, he looked at Todd like he had been abducted and replaced with a clone.

"What?" Todd asked when he saw Neil's face.

"You don't like coconut," Neil said, "This is definitely coconut."

"It's not that bad," Todd said with surprise himself, "It's pretty good, actually. I like it."

"You don't like coconut," Neil repeated.

"You do," Todd responded.

"And what? I like everything."

"But you *like* coconut."

"You don't."

"Well, I like this," Todd said, "So just suck it up, alright?"

"You picked it cause I liked it!" Neil said like he had just solved a murder. "You—"

Todd shoved the drink back in Neil's mouth. "I said suck it up. I ended up liking it, didn't I? I'm trying new things."

Neil did, indeed, take a couple sips of the drink, but then he pushed it

away in protest and glared at Todd. "I'm getting you back."

"You don't 'get back' at someone for doing something nice."

"Watch me."

"I'm so threatened." Todd rolled his eyes and took more sips from the drink. Neil looked away like an angry child and noticed Ginny basically babysitting Cameron. This stop was her turn to keep him from ruining the entire thing. Charlie and Knox were arguing, as per usual, and Meeks and Pitts were having fun with the money Ginny had given them, thankfully having gotten a barista who was ecstatic to help them try everything on the menu for their birthdays. They had gone through a few smoothies, a few frappes, and were now moving on to the specialty drinks. Forgetting he'd already observed all of his friends, Neil kept scanning the area and noticed a figure lurking near the hallways where the restrooms were. He saw the letterman's jacket and knew instantly who it was, and he was suddenly very thankful Ginny had her hands full with Cameron. She wasn't tense like she had been in the electronics store, so he knew she hadn't noticed him yet. He turned back to Todd, and the change in his eyes made Todd instantly question him. "What's wrong?"

He handed the drink back over to Neil, who was talking and barely noticed that he'd grabbed something. "That guy from the electronics store. He's here."

Charlie noticed the shift in the atmosphere between Neil and Todd, caught a snippet of the conversation, and dropped his argument with Knox to drag him over and ask what was going on. Knox was protesting the abrupt finishing of the argument until he heard what Charlie was asking them. "You guys noticed him following us too?"

Neil's and Todd's eyes both widened at that and Todd said, "Following us?"

"Yeah," Charlie said and took a sip of his soft drink as he had chosen to be boring. "Is that not what you guys were talking about?"

"I mean, sort of," Neil responded, "We gotta get him off our back."

"I got it." Charlie tried to turn around and walk away, but Knox caught his shoulder and jolted him back, causing his straw to poke him in the eye. Neil was grateful. Well, not for getting Charlie poked in the eye, but for stopping him from starting something. Don't get Neil wrong, Charlie Dalton was one of the most intimidating people he knew, even

worse than Ginny at times, but that was at Welton. He couldn't stand his own against a seven-foot-tall-lookin football player from public school. Neil wasn't sure at this point that Charlie could stand his own against anyone from public school. Any *student* at least. His disobedience would sure be the final straw to make a public school principal retire, but at least when he was unhinged at Welton, he got disciplined for it. Neil wasn't sure proper discipline existed at public schools. Ginny had said that one time Chet told her about a bunch of boys pissing on the locker room floor in some sort of protest and all that happened was a dejected school announcement the next day asking the perpetrators to *please* not do that again—which they did. "What's your deal?"

"My *deal*," Knox started, "Is that I don't feel like cutting Holly's day-off short because I have to drag your bloody dumbass to the hospital. And I'm not paying your hospital bill."

"You bought my drink."

"Charlie, I don't know if you know this," Knox said and put a hand on Charlie's shoulder, and then raised his voice, "But hospital bills are a *bit* more expensive than soft drinks!"

Charlie scoffed and shoved Knox off of him, but it was definitely a '*I know you're right, I'm just not gonna say it*' kind of scoff. Neil and Todd looked at each other and then back to their friends before Todd asked, "So what do we do about it?"

"Walk fast, keep our heads down," Charlie shrugged and answered, "Hope for the best." Knox slapped him, and this time Charlie didn't say anything except, "Who's on Cameron duty next store? Still biffed I got first run. I live with him."

"You're best equipped then," Knox said, "So how about shutting the fuck up?"

"Someone's on their period."

"That's not funny," Knox said, "Maybe a girl doesn't have to be on their period to be mad at you. Ever thought about that, Dalton?"

"Oh, yeah, plenty," Charlie said, and his tone of voice meant nothing good to Neil. "*You*, however, would be a little bitch if you had blood coming out of your dick."

"I'd probably be dying!"

"Like a little bitch. Exactly my point."

"Like a little—?" Knox cut himself off, "You know what, Charlie?" But that's when Neil decided that he was done listening.

Finally, Pitts and Meeks ended their drink adventure, having run out of money, and the group took to the sidewalk to pick their next destination. They ended up a couple places, switching off on Cameron duty every new store, and finally he ended up with Neil, who honestly would've been the best to have Cameron with the entire time, but luckily his friends didn't hate him that much. After the record store, game store, weird corner store, and a couple others, they'd ended up at a very cheap boutique. Neil wasn't aware the words "cheap" and "boutique" could be used to compliment each other, but he figured this was God's payment for having to babysit Cameron—who kept saying things about how boutiques were too feminine for them to possibly be interested in anything that they found in there. It made Neil was to drop a burning cigarette on the floor and wait for Cameron to step on it, but he couldn't do that.

He didn't have a cigarette.

Letterman didn't leave them alone. He followed them from store to store, and they couldn't keep it from Ginny for too long. Eventually she noticed and clung very closely to either Neil or Charlie the entire time. When it was Neil's turn to babysit Cameron, Ginny spent the entire time with Charlie, and he gave her a piggyback ride around the store to make her feel better. Neil could tell it distracted her, but now they were *all* unsettled that this guy had been following them around the entire day. It was around six-thirty, and they had all decided to watch a movie at seven fifteen, so the boutique was their last destination. They spent some time basically loitering around, and during that time was when things started escalating.

Neil had been having a separate inner-debacle about a jacket that he had bought. The only reasons he had gotten it were because it was cheap and it was cool-looking, but he always had an after-purchase crisis about whether or not it was entirely necessary. It wasn't like it made him any warmer, he was already wearing a sweater, and it didn't look good with his outfit. Winter was almost over and it was too "rebellious" looking to wear around Welton. Todd, in a beanie that he had bought because his ears were getting too cold, kept trying to tell Neil that it was his money and he could do whatever he wanted with it. Cameron kept telling him it *was* a mistake because he was pretty sure it was a jacket made for girls, which branched into a separate

argument.

"Okay, dumbass, not only was it on a rack marked for *men*," Todd said, and he didn't usually think cursing at Cameron was worth the energy, so Neil knew he was serious. "Clothes are clothes. What the fuck does it matter?"

"It matters because different body types go well in different clothing and different genders have different body types."

"Don't give me that bullshit like you actually care about it," Todd said, "You'd cut the words in the bible out and put them into an alphabet soup to digest it better if you hadn't already shoved it into your stomach through your ass." Neil had decided to remain silent, figuring anything he could say would make it worse. Surely, it wouldn't help either side if he mentioned how Todd read his scriptures every night before he went to bed. Todd thought the Bible was complete and utter bullshit. He did not, however, think that God was. But if he said that it would either help Todd's argument or make him look like a hypocrite, so he definitely thought shutting up was the best way to go about it. To make matters worse, he kept looking over Cameron's shoulder and seeing Letterman leaning against a wall. At the beginning of his stalking, he'd had his eyes set on Ginny, but Neil couldn't help but notice that he'd been pretty set on him and Todd during their last few stops.

"At least I *can* digest the words in the Bible," Cameron said, "As opposed to you—"

Cameron stopped and Todd's ears visibly perked up. He stood up straight. "Me? Oh, really? As opposed to me *what*, Cameron?" Neil got flashbacks to fifth grade—to Cameron calling Todd a fairy and to ignoring Todd for weeks because of it. Only to be told that Todd was used to it and that he could handle himself. Seeing the fire behind Todd's eyes as his mind rolled over what they all knew Cameron was going to say, Neil believed it for the first time. "As opposed to me taking it up the ass? As opposed to me not giving a shit what the *fuck* you have to say about it? Do go on."

Cameron fell back. "That is not what I was going to say."

"Stuff it," Todd said, "We *all* know you have a problem with it."

"Most of the world does, alright?" Cameron said, "You should be more concerned about it."

"I should be more—you what?" Todd asked, and Neil felt like he was going to have to start holding him back at some point. But Todd started walking toward Cameron before Neil even conjured the thought that maybe the situation needed damage control. The house was definitely on fire. "You think I don't *know* that most of the world would crucify me? You're such an oblivious dick sometimes, Cameron. I know that better than you do. That's my whole god damn life. I live that *every day*,"

Cameron stepped backward, and he started looking like he genuinely regretted everything he had ever done. Which made Neil think *good*, but then he realized there were tears brimming in Todd's eyes. "I'm sorry, Todd."

"Shove it up your ass with the bible," Todd said, and he was about to continue, but he stopped dead when Neil grabbed his hand and tried to pull him back a little. The house was on fire, and tears were not the kind of water it needed. Neil felt Todd untense in his hand, and Todd's entire body turned to him while Cameron scurried away to find another one of their friends that wouldn't yell at him right then. There was usually a cooldown time when someone decided to go off on Cameron. It was an unspoken rule. Ginny realized what was going on and had hopped off of Charlie's back to rush over, and Neil was glad. He could not do this alone. Not with something this big. Todd looked at his concerned friends and then to the door. "Can we go outside?"

"Yeah," Ginny said, soothingly, taking his shoulders and nearly pulling Todd's hand out of Neil's, but Todd held on strong enough that Neil got pulled along too. "Yeah, let's go outside." They walked right past Letterman as they went out the door. Ginny tensed as they did, but didn't say anything about it. Neil made a point to keep eye contact with him as they walked, making sure he knew that they were aware they had been being followed that entire time, but Neil was sure it didn't do much. When they were outside, it was evident how heavy Todd was breathing by the vapor coming out of his mouth. Ginny looked between the two of them. "What just happened?"

"Everybody can keep Cameron from being a bigot except me," Neil said, "I don't think I scare him enough." Ginny wasn't entertained by that comment, but it made Todd laugh slightly, so it was worth saying. Even if only a little. He held Todd's hand and swung it a little. "I think *you* scare him plenty now, though."

Ginny went along with it, "Oh, absolutely. Did you see the way he ran?" She muttered the next part with a lot of hatred. "Like the little

rat he is."

They laughed for a nice moment at Ginny's comment, and then Neil realized Todd was shaking. "You're shaking."

"It's rage," Todd dismissed.

"No." Neil took his hand back and pressed the back of both his hands to Todd's cheeks. The tip of his nose was red. "You're cold."

"I'm fine."

"No, you're cold," Neil said again. He shook off the jacket that had caused this whole thing and then threw it over Todd's shoulders, forcing both his arms into the sleeves and pulling it tight around his frame. Meanwhile, it was six fifty, and Ginny had gone inside to give the others money and tell them to walk to the theatre without her, Neil, and Todd to get seats while Todd calmed down. They were told this when they came back out, but Charlie noticed Letterman behind them leaving the boutique, so he told Neil he was taking Ginny with them, and Neil said that was alright. Just him and Todd was plenty alright. Neil kept pulling the jacket around Todd's shoulders and felt something in the shirt pocket. It was just a pencil, but it reminded Neil of something, so he reached down and started patting down all of Todd's pockets. Todd was too flushed to even ask him what he was doing. Soon enough he pulled out a cigarette and a lighter. "You always have them."

"For you," Todd protested.

"I know," Neil said and then stuck the smoke stick between Todd's lips. He used his hand as a shield and lit it. "This ones for you, though."

"Don't train me into wanting a cigarette when I'm upset," Todd said, but took a large inhale anyway.

"I'm not," Neil said and put the lighter back into his own pocket after realizing how much he had been touching Todd. "I just know that it makes *me* feel better, so I'm using what I know, alright?"

"You're dumb," Todd said and took the cigarette out of his mouth and between two fingers, extending to to Neil. "Stupid."

"I know," Neil said again, and instead of taking a drag off the cigarette by taking it in his own hands, he just leaned down and took one from the side. Todd simply stared at him as he did this, and when Neil

noticed, he blew the smoke in Todd's face. Todd didn't cough, but instead put the cigarette back in his own mouth. "Take a picture, Toddsie, it'll last longer."

"Trust me," Todd exhaled, "If I had a camera, I would." The comment was unexpected, and though he didn't really know what it meant, Neil wasn't sure how to respond. He had no time to, anyway, as he noticed that Letterman was standing near them. Way nearer than he had been before. He was hoping—well, it sounded bad, but he was hoping Letterman had continued to follow the others. Movie theatre clerks had a weird super power of being able to point out weirdos and tell them to leave, so Neil kind of hoped that was what was going to happen. He should've known better. Letterman seemed done with Ginny. He was more interested in whatever him and Todd were doing, and now they were alone without any of their friends. Todd noted Neil's facial expression changed and glanced over his shoulder, seeing what Neil saw, and when he turned back he didn't look scared, he just looked angry. "Oh, I get it."

Neil looked down at him. "You get what?"

"Mr. Douche over there cracked the code," Todd said, "And I'm assuming he decided stalking two gay boys was more interesting than the pretty girl that he already harassed."

"That's not... good."

"Profound, Neil," Todd stared blankly at him, "But, hey, it's most of the world."

"I don't like that."

"We have to deal with it."

"We shouldn't have to," Neil said, and out of all the problems he'd ever had with liking boys, public homophobia had never been necessarily at the top of the list, but then again, he didn't usually go out in public wrapping his jacket around another boy's shoulders and staring at him like he meant everything. "But I guess there's nothing we can do about it."

"Wait?" Todd shrugged.

"I guess."

Then suddenly, from five feet away, "Hey! Faggot!" And it hurt Neil

that Todd looked up. That action was met with a, "Not you! The other one." To which Neil looked up and saw Letterman shouting at them. Ominous looming figures got significantly more scary when they started talking. Because then you knew that they were actually human, and humans are capable of doing all the scary things that the ominous looming figure did. Neil didn't *not* believe Ginny when she had told them this being had harassed her countless times at football games, but his voice gave Neil the ability to place it in a mental picture, and it got twenty times more real. Neil knew it was probably best to just leave it alone, to walk to the movie theatre and hope that he was right about observant movie theatre clerks, but something in him was not letting him walk away from this confrontation.

Neil pushed Todd behind him and stepped forward. "My rates are kinda high if you're interested." That one did make Letterman stop his approach for a split second, and it caused Todd to guffaw. "What's your name, *sweetheart*?"

Even though it was a completely ironic question, Letterman replied, "Tony."

"Tony. Of course it's Tony," Neil said, "You look like a Tony for sure."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You don't got a sense of humor, Tony? Come on now." Neil wasn't entirely sure when he got picked up by the collar of the sweater and pushed up against the wall, but he was there in two seconds, and he saw that Todd was too scared to move and *Tony* was now angrily breathing in his face. Somewhere in Neil's mind, he told himself he just needed to keep it together and he'd get out of this just fine. He looked down and saw that "Tony" was, indeed, embroidered on the letterman jacket. "Whatcha doin' there, Tony? You gotta let me know if we're playing a round of—"

"Shut the fuck up," Tony basically spat in Neil's face.

"Well, that's *rude*." Neil tried to shove Tony off of him, but he was too big and barely budged, so Neil was instead shoved back against the wall. The back of his head bounced against the brick and Tony thought it was super entertaining. Neil slipped out of his persona for a second to ask, "What's your problem, man?"

"You people are my problem," Tony said, "I've been following you all day trying to get to that bird. Instead I have to see you two homos thinking you can do whatever the hell you want in public."

"I can," Neil responded, and that might've been a mistake when his head hit the wall again. Neil refused to look at Todd. He wanted to forget that Todd was even close to this—that Todd was even seeing this happen. Finally, Tony let go of him. "If you're going to beat me up, just do it. I have a movie to get to."

"I have a better idea," Tony said, "You kept protecting Chet's sister like she was in some sort of trouble. Now I'm frustrated, so *you're* gonna take care of it." Neil's blood ran cold. He could only guess what that was supposed to mean. Something he'd never done before, though, he knew that.

Neil tried to be brave. "Not gonna happen."

"Oh, no?" Tony asked and then turned toward Todd, and if that's not when the blood rushed back into Neil's veins and nearly made them burst, it sure was when Tony said, "Then I'm sure your little boyfriend would be more than willing."

Neil approached him from the back and whipped him around from the shoulder, throwing his hardest punch at Tony's jaw. He felt pretty good about it when he felt his hand hurting, but not when Tony's head only slightly jerked and he punched Neil ten times as hard. So hard that Neil heard his neck crack as he flew toward the ground at the angle he had been punched. Todd called his name, and somehow that made Tony decide it wasn't worth it anymore, so he walked away, presumably to find someone else to follow. Once he was out of the way, Todd rushed to the ground and tried to pick Neil up. Neil tried to shoo him away, but Todd wasn't letting up.

"Your nose is bleeding."

"It's okay, I've had a broken leg before."

"God, Neil." Todd adjusted himself so he was supporting Neil with one hand. He held up three fingers. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Three."

"Good. Now?"

"Five."

"Now?"

"One."

"Okay." Todd put both his hands back under Neil and was trying to get him to stand up while asking more questions. "What month is your birthday?"

"November."

"How old are you?'"

"Fifteen."

"Where do you go to school?"

"Welton Academy." Neil was finally on his feet and successfully got Todd away from him. "Are you done now, doctor? I'm fine."

"Neil, you just got punched in the fucking face!"

"And I'm perfectly fine."

Todd grabbed his shoulders. "You're not—It's not—Fuck, Neil."

Neil definitely felt like his eyes were set right in his head, but he tried to look at Todd as calmly as he could. "Are you okay?"

"Fuck, I guess!" Todd yelled, "Since you decided that it was a fantastic idea to punch a six-two two-hundred pound football player!"

"One-fifty at most."

"Shut up! It doesn't matter!" Todd tried to take a breath, but he noticed something else and rushed forward again as if he couldn't be any closer to Neil's face. "Your eye is swollen. You're going to have a black eye. What are you gonna tell Nolan?"

"That I got into a fight with Charlie."

"Neil!"

"What!" Neil yelled back, exasperated. "You want me to tell him I got decked because I'm a fucking faggot who's in love with Todd Anderson? Not only would we never be allowed in town again, but I'd probably get expelled. Or you! And I'd never see you again!"

"I guess not," Todd breathed heavily, "But you need to think of a better lie, and we *need* to get you some ice."

"We can get some at the theater."

"You still wanna go to the movies!?"

"Well, yeah!" Neil screamed, "Todd, we can't tell any of them what just happened. They'd feel bad for leaving us."

"Is *this* how you deal with problems!?"

"Mostly, yeah!" Neil took his own set of breaths and then looked down at Todd again. "Listen, I got hit in the face with a door, alright? And we can tell Charlie and them *after* today, okay? Does that sound good?"

"Yeah, sure," Todd said, completely uninterested.

"Would you *work* with me here?" Neil asked.

"I'm trying, I'm trying!" Todd put his hands to his forehead and tried to breathe. Neil instinctively wrapped him in a hug, feeling blood drip down his face. He tried to angle his head in a way that wouldn't drop blood into Todd's hair, and Todd felt it. "Are you trying not to get blood in my hair right now?"

"Maybe."

"You're so stupid." Todd pulled back. "You just got punched in the face and you're worried about getting blood in my hair."

"You have nice hair."

"Let's just go to the movie."

—

In the theatre and by the time it was over and they were back at Welton, it was too dark for anyone to see what had happened to Neil's face. Him and Todd decided it would be even better to wait until after the Friday was entirely over. Let everybody go to bed with their happy day and then explain when they saw the physical effect it had on Neil the next day at breakfast or whenever. Neil constantly kept poking his swollen eye as he sat at the edge of his bed waiting for Todd to come back from the infirmary with a bag of ice. When he did, he swatted both of Neil's hands away and instead applied the ice himself. Ever since things had calmed down, Todd refused to look Neil in the eye, and it had been *hours.* Unfortunately, Neil knew exactly why that was, and he was only *slightly* proud he had broken the one-hour record for Todd not making eye contact.

To be fair, it wasn't entirely his fault that he had referred to himself as "a faggot in love with Todd Anderson."

He was sure that's what Todd had to be thinking about, and it hurt him to think about, but he knew it wasn't true. He really liked Todd, but he wasn't sure he even knew what it felt like to be in love with anyone. It was just the quickest exaggeration his angry, manic mind had to jump to at that moment. He was also trying to take things super slow, and throwing the 'L' word in there was about the same as dropping a heavy rock on the gas pedal.

He was still thinking about it when he was in bed that night, facing the wall. He couldn't fall asleep, and he knew Todd couldn't either when he heard the floorboards creak and definitely when Todd climbed into his bed, wrapped his arms around his abdomen, and shoved his face into his back. Neil's eyes finally closed when Todd was there with him, but he didn't want that. He wanted to take the rock *off* the gas pedal, not leave it there and rig the brakes. Todd turned his head and pressed his cheek into Neil's back, and Neil felt the hesitation even when he couldn't see it.

"You're not actually in love with me, right?"

Neil didn't know how honest he should've been, but then he realized the answer was just... honest. "Not yet."

"Okay," Todd sighed, "Good."

It was silent for a couple more moments, and Neil was on the brink of sleep, but then Todd spoke again.

"I thought of a good idea for our English project."

Chapter End Notes

thank you for reading im sorry for the mini hiatus thanks for sticking with me ive just been so busy!!

summary for anyone who skipped: the boys have a new english teacher who has assigned a partner project, todd and neil are partners but cant agree on what to do, everyone (including ginny) goes out for a day on the town for pitts and meeks birthdays but are followed around by a high school senior named tony who harasses todd and neil. neil gets punched in the face, and

somehow this inspires todd's idea for their english project

luv u all <333

Freshman Year—Never Goalie

Chapter Summary

Todd isn't so sure about things in the morning after the PeeksMitts week celebration. Neil thinks he's overreacting.

Chapter Notes

sorry i do believe this one is kind of bad. i am back in a slump but this one has been sitting in the drafts for a while so i figured i might as well finish it.

yall know the routine. just typed and thrown up so excuse any typos.

cw// implied/mentioned homophobia

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil woke up the next morning alone in his bed. He tried to blink away his sleep, but that was unsuccessful when pain rippled through the upper-left side of his face. His hand shot up to his eye and he felt a much more swollen area than that which had been there last night. He groaned like it was some kind of minor inconvenience and threw his legs over the side of the bed, wondering, sleepy and angry, why Todd would leave him to wake up and discover the swelling alone. His question was answered when the door opened and Todd walked into the room with a bag of ice in his hands. He was still in pajamas and his hair was still messy, telling Neil that Todd had probably woken up only minutes before him—and the first thing he did was run off somewhere to gather a bag of ice. Maybe Neil wasn't so mad about being left alone anymore. Todd stepped forward and silently handed the bag to Neil, refusing to look him in the eye. Neil wasn't sure if it was because Todd didn't want to further acknowledge his injury or if he was still hung up on the comment from yesterday. Either way, Neil didn't mention it and took the bag of ice to slowly raise up to his face and press it against his skin. He winced at the sudden cold, but overall sighed at the relief.

While Neil soothed his face, Todd wandered over to his desk and pulled out one of his notebooks. It wasn't until he began scribbling down some words that Neil remembered that last night Todd had proposed an English project idea. He wasn't sure how anything about

what had happened the day before inspired an idea in Todd's brain, but he wasn't going to question it because he actually *liked* the idea. Together, they would go through the entire script of *Romeo and Juliet* and pull out specific scenes and lines of dialogue that really presented the conflict and plot, then Todd would fashion it all together into a one-scene script, and finally, Neil would perform it for the class. It was a combination of all the ideas they had presented before, and Neil was only upset that they hadn't thought of it before. Todd silently finished his writing and then turned back to Neil, who had become distracted by Todd's writing and let the hand with the bag of ice fall. Todd walked over and shoved Neil's elbow upward, and the bag of ice poked Neil in the eye.

"Ow," Said Neil plainly.

"Sorry," Todd responded. He was looking off to the side, but Neil was sure that he could still catch a glance of the darkening bruise. "Do you want to go down to breakfast soon?" While Neil was considering a response, Todd turned around to rummage through his wardrobe to find something to wear which was a process that at least took twenty minutes. None of the boys, give or take Knox and Charlie, were very good at dressing themselves when they didn't have to be in uniform. Neil himself only had about three pairs of pants and two different shirts that he brought with him from home. Neil heard the scratching of hangers and looked up to see Todd shoving around his items of clothing rather harshly.

"You alright there, Toddsie?" Neil asked.

Todd only stopped pushing his clothes for a second to say, "Yeah."

"Did you wanna... *talk* about yesterday?" Neil wasn't sure exactly what that meant, but he knew that his black eye wasn't the only effect yesterday's interaction had on them. There had to be something emotional. He was sure of it, and he just had to make sure Todd was okay himself before going downstairs and having to explain to all their friends what had happened.

"No, not really," Todd responded, and Neil was about to sigh until he continued, "I suppose we should though."

"I agree," Neil stated, "How—I mean—how are you?"

"I dunno." Todd was shoving his clothes even harsher now. "It made me think, I guess."

"About?"

"I don't want to say." He paused temporarily, and then pulled out a shirt and tossed it on his bed. "It might upset you."

In seconds, Neil's head was swarmed with thoughts and he couldn't even pick out one of them. They were all bad possibilities of what Todd could be thinking, but Neil tried to ignore them. If he knew anything, he knew that he was actually *very bad* at predicting what Todd was going to say. Todd turned and studied Neil's face for a moment, but the second Neil went to meet his eyes, he turned back around and thumbed with the shirt that he'd tossed on his bed. Neil took a breath. "No, I wanna hear it."

"By 'might' I mean 'will.'" Todd said, "It *will* upset you."

Neil's hand was wet with melted ice from the bag, so he stood up to throw it in the trash. On the way, he decided that maybe he should start getting ready too. At least it would give him something to do while worrying about how Todd's brain worked. "Then upset me."

"I was just thinking..." Now Todd was searching through his drawers for some pants, aimlessly unfolding and folding several pairs of jeans. There was no sureness in his movements, and everything about it was making Neil even more anxious. Todd mumbled something, and Neil was so worried about what he was going to say that he missed it. For a moment, Neil received a comedic glare from Todd. One that said 'only *you* would not be paying attention the exact moment I finally say it.' Then it went away and Todd bit his lip, realizing now that he had Neil's attention, he had to repeat it. "I just thought you should move on."

"*What*?" Neil asked, "What do you mean 'move on?'" He asked the question, but he clearly hadn't intended to listen to an answer because he kept going. "From *you*? No. No way. What're you thinking that for?" Somehow, in his ramble, he had pulled out a complete outfit from his wardrobe. He looked at it for a moment, decided it was acceptable, and turned around to change so he had an excuse not to look at Todd. He couldn't when he was suggesting things like that.

"Clearly liking me puts you in danger," Todd said, and Neil heard sounds of him getting dressed too. Neil thought it odd that they were having this conversation without looking at one another, but then he remembered that it was him who had broken the face-to-face contact first. "You should like a girl. It'd be safer."

Neil was upset. He was devastated, and he started doing that thing where he didn't think before he talked. "And what? What do I care about safety? I like *you*. I'm not gonna go and like a girl."

Todd sighed deeply. "Why not?"

"Because I like *you,*" Neil repeated, "Weren't you the one crawling into *my* bed last night? Where did this come from?"

"Oh, I don't know," Todd started, and Neil felt a surge of anger and sarcasm coming on. He was right. "Maybe when I woke up to go get you a bag of ice to heal your black eye that you got when you, I don't know, *got punched in the face*. Why was it you got punched again? Oh, right! Me!"

Neil spun around angrily, the shirt he was putting on in his hands and the shirt he had been wearing long gone in the room somewhere. It had been flung in anger at the beginning of Todd's response. "That is *not* why. I got punched because I was being a little prick! I'd of punched me too!" He whipped his shirt in his hands to smooth out wrinkles and started muttering something really empathetic about Tony, which Todd was not having. He, fully clothed, walked over and ripped the shirt out of Neil's hands and smacked him on the shoulder with it. "Now what was that for!?"

"Defending Tony?" Todd answered in a questioning tone and shoved Neil's shirt back in his hand. "You're an idiot sometimes. God!"

"The only idiotic thing here is you thinking that I can just *get over you* and *go like a girl*."

"Oh, you could!" Todd yelled, "Just phone up Mira! I'm sure she'd love to hear from you."

"Did I ever tell you she broke up with me because she thought I was in love with you?"

"Well—" Todd stopped mid-word and turned around slowly to Neil, who was putting his shirt on over his head because being shirtless during this conversation simply did not seem right at all. "*What*?"

"Yeah," Neil said, and then had no idea how to follow that up, so he just said again, "Yeah."

"Okay, well..." Todd thought for a moment. "That I didn't know. No, you never told me that. But it doesn't change anything! I still think

you'd be better off without me."

"I'd never be better off without you," Neil replied, "And you need to *stop* trying to convince me that I would be. Now do you want to go to breakfast? Or do you want to keep trying to convince me of the impossible? Because I'm hungry."

"We can go to breakfast," Todd answered, but then pointed accusingly at Neil before he could start heading out the door. "But don't get all mad at me like you didn't *beg* me to tell you what I was thinking. Clearly I thought it was irrational because I didn't want to explicitly say it in the first place!"

"So you *knew* it was irrational and you *still* thought it?"

"Yeah, I thought it because you're *stubborn*," Todd rebutted to Neil's tone, and then he stormed to the door and threw open the door before Neil had time to process that. Once he did, he walked the rest of the way to the dining hall in silence. Todd was so *difficult* to convince. Neil could write him seven sonnets and Todd would still somehow think that Neil liked him because he was *stubborn,* not because there was anything about him to like. Out of all the problems Neil thought he was going to have with this crush on Todd, having to convince Todd that it was *real* and have it stick was not at the top of the list. At the top of the list was what had happened yesterday, but Neil didn't care about that. He liked boys anyway you sliced it, and keeping himself away from the boy of his dreams wasn't going to make homophobia go away, so he might as well deal with it *with* the boy of his dreams rather than let it keep them separate. He was so caught up in these thoughts he barely noticed that he was being stared at intensely the second he walked into the dining hall.

"What the fuck happened?" Charlie crudely stated since no one else was saying anything. "Is Todd finally sick of your shit? Is this about the English project?" Neil glared at him, but stopped shortly after he realized that squinting his eye hurt. Luckily, Todd was glaring at Charlie for him, and Todd hardly ever held a glare at anyone, so Charlie retracted immediately. He was always the worst in the mornings, but Todd's hostility seemed to have woken him up. "Seriously, what happened?"

"Got punched," Neil said shortly, catching glimpses of Cameron sneaking glances over at their table, examining Neil's eye. Somehow, Cameron knew how Neil had got his injury, Neil could feel it. Oddly, Neil suspected it was because Cameron actually *felt bad.* Maybe he

didn't realize that his homophobia actually hurt the people he called his friends, maybe this was his first step to break his path of bigotry—whatever it was, Neil didn't particularly care, so he gave Cameron a hard stare (without squinting his eyes) and that made Cameron refrain from looking at him for the rest of breakfast. He looked back and saw the confused look on all of his friends faces, and he didn't feel like answering a flood of questions, so he told his friends that and then provided them with the short version of the events. Todd remained silent the entire time.

"And you still went to the movies?" Meeks asked, concerned greatly for his friend, but mostly about how he didn't notice Neil's injury the night before. "Idiot... you could've had a concussion!"

"Doctor Anderson made sure I didn't," Neil spoke with unnecessary annoyance. *Dangerous*. Liking Todd was *dangerous*. He nearly scoffed out loud. As if it was dangerous. He held steady the belief that it was his fault he got punched. It was nearly like Todd knew exactly what he was thinking, because Neil caught him rolling his eyes. There was nothing else Neil could do but glare back at him. Their friends looked between the two of them slowly, trying to process what the hostility between them could *possibly* be this time. Because to everyone else, there was virtually no reason they had to be fighting all the time. None. Zilch. Charlie was about ready to slam their faces together and call it a day that's how irritated he was (not to say he wasn't tempted to do that on a regular day).

Todd stuck his fork in his food and glared around at his friends. "*What*?"

"Nothing much, grumpy pants," Charlie responded, and it nearly made Todd gag. When he used toddler vocabulary, it was worth shivering over. "Shouldn't this have brought you two together or something?"

"It did," Neil said before he could think, "Before Todd woke up and started thinking *stupid*."

"Me?!" Todd responded, "*You're* the one who—who—" He looked around at everyone staring at them and shut his mouth, deciding whatever it was wasn't worth saying in front of the whole dining hall. Neil made the mistake of giving him a *touché* kind of look, and Todd slid his plate away from him to stand up and storm off. Neil's eyes followed him out of the hall, and when he turned back, all eyes were on him now. He shrugged at them, as if Todd was such a drama queen, and they all continued eating until breakfast was done.

Neil was glad he'd gotten through the morning, but the thing was he had an entire day of doing nothing. He'd finished all his homework in advance for his father to allow him out for the PeeksMitts week celebration, it wasn't soccer season, and he had no other extra-curriculars. Charlie offered a scrimmage and requested that Neil ask Todd to join them. Neil didn't want him to, but it wasn't because of the fight they were in. It was because he really didn't want to be shown up right then. Nonetheless, Charlie pressured him and soon he was trudging up the stairs to him and Todd's room to invite the boy to play scrimmage. When he opened the door, Todd was in the corner of his bed reading a book. He didn't look up when Neil entered, and Neil was sure that wasn't a good sign.

He jumped straight to the question, figuring any small talk wouldn't get him anywhere. "Wanna join scrimmage?" Neil realized that Todd was reading a copy of *Romeo and Juliet* when he folded the book in half. He was scatting down notes in the book and biting the eraser end of his pencil. *Stupid English project...*

Todd didn't look up from his book, but he said, "Sure."

After a few moments of no one moving, Neil said, "Like... right now."

"Give me a second."

"Okay."

Todd tapped his pencil on the edge of his book and Neil could tell that he'd caught him in a moment of true thought. He wasn't sure how into *Romeo and Juliet* Todd could've possibly gotten in the few hours between then and breakfast, but he didn't doubt Todd's ability to become invested in literature, so a high level of dedication was entirely possible. Todd's eyes drifted above the top of his book at Neil standing there in silence. "You can go down without me, you know?"

"I could."

"I need to work on that," Todd muttered under his breath and Neil barely caught it. "Go down without me. I'll meet you guys in a few." Neil found an excuse to stay a couple more minutes in the disaster jacket from the previous day that was shoved deeply in the back of his wardrobe. He put it on and then left without looking back, hoping that Todd noticed he had done so.

He made his way to the park where Charlie, Knox, Pitts, and *Cameron* were waiting. Meeks was somewhere, he was sure, but he wasn't there

for soccer. Meeks would do his best to avoid the physical sport for as long as he could because, yes, he played soccer in the fall, but that did *not* mean that he enjoyed doing so. He was probably off taking some samples of a tree or something. That didn't surprise Neil. What surprised Neil was the fact that Cameron was there, and that he hadn't yet been tackled. When Cameron's eyes set on him, it occurred in his brain that Cameron was probably there to talk to him. After overhearing the story this morning, he must've wanted to say something to Neil. Neil supposed it would be something along the lines of "I told you so" but he was sorely mistaken when Cameron approached him and started with, "I'm sorry."

Neil couldn't hold back his eyebrow raise or his questioning, "Oh?"

Cameron gestured at the jacket and black-eye. "It's not my business. Never was."

"Okay."

"So I'm sorry."

"Thanks." Neil felt awkward, so he stuffed his hands in his pockets and leant back and forth on the balls of his feet, shifting the pressure and getting the sudden anxiety that he was going to break his leg again. Of course, it was possible, but he was only scared of it *right* before he was about to play soccer. Perfect timing. He looked over at Knox and Charlie searching each of their pockets for a quarter. "You playing?"

"Charlie said if I came, I would have to," Cameron responded, and Neil finally smiled for, what he thought was, the first time all morning. Cameron wasn't one to play soccer either. He wasn't bad at it. Neil was sure he'd be good if he tried, but he was clumsy. For the sake of his entertainment, Neil never gave him any tips. Cameron gave him a nervous smile in response. "So I guess so. Is—uh—is Todd coming?"

"Yeah," Neil answered.

"Cool, cool..."

"You're planning on apologizing to him too, right?"

"Of course."

"Good."

It wasn't until about thirty minutes later that Todd found them in the

park they were planning in. It was one off-campus, but not too far, and they frequented it more than their own school's soccer field. That's how Neil knew that Todd wasn't late because he didn't tell him where they were meeting. He was late simply just because.
Surely *Romeo and Juliet* couldn't have been *that* riveting. Such a cheesy love story wasn't Todd's vibe anyway, and neither was tirelessly working on homework on a Saturday. Todd was good at giving himself Saturdays. Neil was almost ninety-five percent sure that Todd was showing up late as some sort of statement. What kind of statement, he didn't know, but a statement, for sure. He walked up to Charlie and asked if they could practice penalties instead. Charlie took one look at him and agreed.

"What!" Knox shouted. He had just spent the past thirty minutes on a team with Cameron as goalie. He'd played every other position up against Charlie, who was goalie by nature, but never knew how to stay in his box, and Neil, who was rather good at playing every position. Basically, Knox and Cameron had been so dunked on, that if the scrimmage didn't continue and at least improve Knox's skills even a *little bit*, it was nothing for him but a degrading activity. Charlie whipped around and glared at him, and Knox fell back and agreed. Sure, they could practice penalties. He could use some improvement on that too maybe. Or, at least, that's what he spontaneously decided under the weight of Charlie's glare.

Neil was surprised when Todd walked over to him and put a hand on his shoulder. "Can you be goalie?"

"Huh?" Neil asked, "I'm never goalie."

"Trust me," Todd said and sighed, as if this was a decision he had spent plenty of thought on. "You want me to get my anger out by kicking soccer balls at you."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"Trust me," Todd repeated, and with that, Neil was in goal, facing all of his friends—even Meeks—who were ready to shoot soccer balls right in his direction. His black-eye apparently didn't earn him any sympathy, but at the least, for penalties, aiming at the goalie was the *last* thing they would want to do. Everyone discovered pretty quickly that there was a reason Neil was never goalie. He *sucked*. It didn't make him upset, for this was something he already knew, but it was unnecessarily humiliating. Naturally, Todd scored on him most, banking shot after shot. He never had a pattern. Center, then upper-

right corner, then lower-left corner, then center again, and when Neil was *sure* he wouldn't go for center two times in a row, he did. All he got in return to his continuous groans were little smirks that almost made him proud of Todd, but *god* he was considering putting ants in that kid's bed.

"Is it 'embarrass Neil' day or something!" Neil shouted after Cameron and Meeks had scored on him consecutively. He was good at defense, offense, literally *anything* else besides goalie. Charlie laughed loudly at him, slapping Todd on the back for putting into motion the incredible idea of Neil in goal. Neil's shout went unanswered verbally, but the guffaws from his friends were answer enough. He scoffed at them and kicked up a chunk of grass, mutely wondering what he did to deserve this embarrassment. Sure, Todd could get out his anger, but did it really entail *this*? No one noticed his angry kick at the ground, but when he did it again and his toe caught in the ground and tripped him forward, everyone turned to him. He groaned very unpleasantly into the damp grass and refused to roll over toward the sky even when he felt his friends standing around him.

Charlie's dull cleat prodded him in the side, but, still, he didn't move. Maybe if they thought he was hurt, they'd feel bad for doing this to him. As Charlie continued to poke his side however, it became apparent to Neil that this wasn't a possibility. He rolled over, feeling some wet grass sticking to his clothes as he did so, and realizing that there would be even more of that on his backside. This realization pulled another groan from him and he squinted at the shadows of his friends looming over him, blocking the bright sun from blinding Neil and giving him another thing to be angry at. He couldn't see his friends faces, but he just knew they were smiling. All apart from Cameron who, after seeing fit to not marvel at Neil's tortured stance anymore, leaned down and pulled him up by the elbows.

He stumbled upward and came face-to-face with Todd, glaring at him. Todd just raised an eyebrow. "Problem?"

And, with complete disregard for the service Cameron had provided him while pulling him off the squishy grass, he surged forward and tackled Todd.

Todd barely had enough time to get the gasp of "—Neil!" out of his mouth before they both collided with the ground. Really, he should've expected this, Neil thought. There was a reason why his name in that tone from Todd fell upon familiar ears. Neil had heard it plenty of times before. He'd pushed Todd to the ground on this very soccer field

several times; he'd pushed Todd into a *lake* before, so he really had no clue why Todd hadn't expected this to happen after poking his bear-stomach temper. They wrestled until Todd kicked him so hard in the stomach he had to flop over to side from the devastation of the blow. His best friend then proceeded to climb on top of him and tug his hair from the roots painfully backward. "Don't tackle me."

Neil, stead-fast, said, "Don't make me mad."

"I wouldn't make you mad if you weren't so stupid."

"I wouldn't be so stupid if—" Todd again perked up an eyebrow when Neil cut himself off, not considering for a second loosening his grip even a little on Neil's hair. He tilted his head down at Neil, but it wasn't in a questioning way as he usually did, it was a challenge. It was Todd basically saying *go on, say it.* "—if I didn't like you."

Todd finally let go of his head, and Neil didn't realize that it had been hoisted above the ground until it had fallen harshly back upon the grass. "So you admit it?" Todd asked and crawled off of Neil, sitting on his knees next to him. "Liking me makes you stupid?"

"Makes me *act* stupid," Neil clarified and clasped his hand in Todd's out-stretched one, helping him to sit up. Then he flicked Todd in the forehead and continued, "I don't like you because I'm stupid; I'm stupid because I like you."

"Isn't that what I said?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. Jesus, talk about a concussion." Neil's dismissal of Todd's difficult was interrupted by his head banging painfully. He put his head in his hands for a couple seconds and then looked back up. There was a ghost of a concerned expression on Todd's face, but Neil didn't care much if Todd was concerned now. "I like you and in result, I have *become* stupid."

Todd hummed, whether happily or unhappily, Neil wasn't sure. "Proves my point."

"*What* point?" Neil asked, looking around and noticing that all of his other friends were long gone. Todd just rolled his eyes at him, and it was that which made Neil realize that he was referencing that morning's conversation. He knew it wasn't the case, but it almost appeared as if Todd had pre-arranged this situation to work out in exactly the way that *would* prove what he had been talking about. "Shut up."

"Not until you admit I was right."

"You're not," Neil asserted.

"I might be."

"You're *not*," He said again, "In fact, that's the stupidest thing you've *ever* said." He shoved Todd away from him and stood up, trying to brush grass off of his clothes considering that they were *all* covered. None of this worked very successfully for him. Todd was merciful enough to not laugh at him this time, but Neil could see a smile tugging on-and-off again at his lips. It infuriated him and he tried again to shove him, but Todd caught his wrist and gave him a warning look. Neil let his rage subside because Todd's hostile look definitely meant that he, with the little sympathy he had, would no-question toss Neil back on the floor.

Todd looked at Neil's hand for a moment while he was holding his wrist, and it almost looked as if he was considering flipping it over and placing it in his. It was a fleeting thought, however, because the next second Neil's arm dropped back down to his side and Todd was making very strong eye contact. This eye contact meant nothing good to Neil, but when Todd asked his question it wasn't anything horrible.

"Want to go take a shower?"

Chapter End Notes

thank yall for your patience. i dont know when im going to update again next. im graduating next month so ive got a lot on my plate!!

Freshman Year—The Gatsby Effect

Chapter Summary

> Neil is starting to realize that his life isn't a chapter book where his problems are solved in two of them.

Chapter Notes

> welcome to another chapter of the author disregarding the time period but also not really and pretending that things are like two decades older than they actually are
>
> cw// mentions of self-harm, themes of homophobia, blood, arguing, self-hatred,
>
> tw// elvis presley, self-harm, self-deprecating speech
>
> uh... hi... it's been a while, but i sat down and forced myself to write this chapter. neil's emotions quite literally mimic how i feel about my own plot.... and... listen i hope you guys like it
>
> did i edit this? no. did i still post it? clearly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Get over it."

Neil wasn't precisely sure why he ever thought, even for a single second, that he'd be able to get some work done alone. He was either being bothered, tutored, or having to listen to his friends not understand any of their own assignments. There was a fleeting moment of hope, though, when he was able to sneak away to his room and pull out the script to *Romeo and Juliet*. After hitting him with several—and I do mean *several*—soccer balls, Todd had finally allowed the both of them to sit down and start picking scenes out of the play. Every time Todd picked one, he talked about how ridiculous heterosexuality was. Neil wasn't exactly sure when Todd had become so confident with himself that he could openly insult heterosexuality, but Neil also knew that Todd would *never* pass up the opportunity to critique a social "norm." Being straight was the "norm," and being absolutely obsessed to the point of suicide was apparently a straight "norm" too. Neil didn't particularly agree with that, but he supposed he wasn't the best to judge. He was gay *and* straight... or... whatever that was. He thought. He liked Todd. Not boys. Just Todd. So he was

straight.

All that to say that Neil was not making too much progress on this project and only *some* of it was because of his gay crises. Most of it was because Charlie Dalton kept walking into his room and announcing things like *Get over it.*

"Get over what, Charlie?" Neil asked him, refusing to look up from the script. He was determined to get something done. *Anything* done. If he kept slacking, he would be no better than his friends when they were falling at the door frame on their faces just to get Todd to be their partner. Neil was supposed to be the solution, and so far all he had done was cause problems.

"Whatever you're mad at Todd for," Charlie stated.

"So specific." Neil tried to flip a page of the script, but suddenly it was getting thrown from his hand and across the room. Usually Charlie was never this violent when confronting him. Well, usually not this violent to objects. Neil was often the victim of Charlie's violence.

"Don't give me that attitude," Charlie said, "I am so *sick* of you and Todd continuously having problems."

"Me too!" Neil replied, "Join the club!"

"Todd told me what yesterday was about," He said.

"Oh really?" Neil asked, "What did he tell you?"

"I'm not saying he's right."

"I didn't—Charlie you haven't even told me anything about the conversation yet."

"I know how you overreact so I am simply setting a precedent," Charlie said. Leave it up to Charlie Dalton to set any precedents. With his whole shit show with Knox—and the shape of doom and all—Neil wasn't sure why Charlie thought he was so superior. Why he thought he was both Todd's and Neil's therapist. "He's just worried. The whole world is full of giant assholes like Cameron and Tony. You're never safe. *We're* never safe."

"Astounding," Neil said, "Astounding how most of the world is full of Cameron's and Tony's yet we're all concentrated in this little place."

"Well, being gay and being magnetic is practically synonymous."

"Okay, Charlie."

Neil was left alone after that. Charlie had probably told all of their friends that Neil was on the brink of another breakdown. He probably meant it for dramatics, but it was true. This English project was huge, and Neil had fifty other assignments he had been forgetting about. How could he think that he had time to worry about how homophobic the world was? Homophobia was already a done deal. His homework was not. Imagine what his father would think if he didn't get A's in all his classes—let alone if it was because he was too busy worrying about how he liked a boy.

So what? Todd wasn't his entire life. Well, Todd needed to *stop* being his entire life. But how was that going to be possible? How do you unplug your own life support? Or switch out for a different health provider? Neil didn't know. His insurance didn't cover being gay.

Straight. It didn't cover being this kind of straight. The kind of straight where you... weren't straight.

Neil glanced at the clock and realized an hour had passed. That was all well and fine until he looked back down at the script he had retrieved from the other side of the room and saw that he wasn't even halfway through. Todd deserved a better partner for this project. Neil couldn't believe Todd had chosen *him*, especially to keep from stressing about it. Neil would never understand what Todd saw in him that was so calming. In fact, he would never understand what Todd saw in him at all. He had said it once and he will say it again, if Todd wasn't such an advocate for the truth, Neil would have never believed him when he confessed his feelings.

Even though he had more than enough assignments to take up his time, Neil decided it was time for a shower. Showering had slowly become a nuisance for Neil. It used to be one of his favorite activities. A moment—that wasn't sleep—that let you pause from the entire world while time still passed. When he was little, showering felt designed to be soothing and peaceful. Now all he could think about was how it was taking up valuable time, how he had *chosen* to take up valuable time with this, and how, no matter what, when he came out of this shower he would never be completely clean. He wouldn't be clean of his crush on Todd, and he wouldn't be clean of the fading scars on his legs. He felt like he was regressing. After every single talk he'd had with Todd, he still couldn't accept the fact that... well, he

couldn't accept anything about himself.

Neil didn't know when he picked up the razor, but realizing it was in his hand was just about as shocking as Todd appearing in front of him and grabbing his wrist. He was instantly filled with a different kind of shame. A *real* kind of shame. It wasn't just his brain making things up anymore. It was Todd's disappointed stare boring into him as he tightened his grip on Neil's wrist. Todd was usually careful with his words, but not this time. "What *the fuck* do you think you're doing?"

"Wh—Why are you in the shower?" Neil knew well enough why. He also knew well enough that acting clueless wasn't going to get him anywhere. Not with Todd, at least.

"Why do you think?" Todd asked, grabbing the handle of the razor and tossing it across the bathroom, not really caring at the moment where it landed. Neil made a mental note to go pick that up later, hoping in the mean time that no one would step on it. "Charlie told me you were acting weird, Meeks said you were headed toward the shower. That was all thirty minutes ago."

"And what?" Neil asked, "I'm not allowed to take long showers? And Charlie doesn't know what he's talking about."

"Unfortunately, Charlie always knows what he's talking about," Todd responded, "And don't argue with me when you know I'm right."

"I don't even know what you're implying."

"You know *damn well* what I am implying, Neil."

"And what?" Neil repeated and swatted Todd's hand away from him. It was weird—weird how he could think about Todd the whole day, but when he was actually in front of him, all it did was make him angry. Todd couldn't have been right when he said—well, The Gatsby effect Neil had tried so hard to prevent... it had worked, right? Neil saw Todd for who he was, he let him *exist* just as he was, right? Neil was beginning to think maybe it hadn't worked out all that well. Maybe being in love was something way too convoluted for a fifteen year old. But he would be damned if he ever gave up trying to work it out. His perspective of Todd might've never been one-hundred percent correct, but it was always correct enough to know that he was worth it—worth anything—and it was okay to have someone who was worth anything. Right then, however, Neil was nothing but mad at Todd for always making his life so complicated. As if it was *his* fault Neil was hopelessly in like with him. "What happened to it being insane for you

to be mad at me?"

"Two years ago it was insane," Todd said, "But this isn't *good,* Neil. You have to know this isn't good."

"I know it's not good!" Neil shouted, "I don't do it as a pass time, alright? I read books as a pass time. I do homework as a pass time. I do *this* as a punishment! Don't you get it? Do *any* of you get it? I hate myself! I hate everything... and I have *no time* to—to—resolve that. There's either homework or my father or... fucking PeeksMitts week! When I do get to be by myself, everything just... just flows over in the wrong way and this is all I have! It's *all I have,* Todd. It's the only thing that makes me feel better. Do you get that?"

"It's not the only thing," Todd insisted, "You just... you're losing yourself. And I—I think it's partly because of me... but I think it's partly because of everything. You have spent so many years not allowing yourself to... to love yourself, and I do *get* that, Neil. I get that better than anyone in this fucking school. And I don't know when I became the mentally stable one, but... *holy shit.* This is too much for you. *Everything* is too much for you. You don't have to do your best at everything all the time. You do know that, right?"

"No," Neil said plainly, "I don't. Doing my best at everything is the only reason I don't *completely* hate myself. And I can't even do that right!" Neil must've been flailing, but again he didn't notice until Todd was grabbing him. It felt weird to be grasped by a fully clothed person while damp from a shower, but Neil was so out of it he didn't even remember whether or not he was wearing a towel. He was just lucky Todd's face was still in full focus in front of him. He'd realized he had a bad habit of losing his grounding when he got too upset, but he'd also realized as long as Todd was there, he'd stay planted on planet Earth. That couldn't have been good. He should've been able to do it himself. Or not. He didn't know. He was too confused because Todd was right. Todd was *always* right. It was too much. This entire year had been a jumble of events that didn't make enough sense following one another. Neil's first year of high school might have just been the worst year of his life, and he wasn't sure how to recalibrate.

Todd didn't let go of him, and even though he was just having a crisis about his dependence, Neil was grateful for it. "There's something to hate about everyone! But not you."

It then occurred to Neil for the first time that maybe Todd held him in the same ideal he had him. That Todd thought things about Neil's

character that weren't true. Sure, Todd was willing enough to call Neil out when he was being a prick, but that was the bare minimum. Did Todd know that Neil wasn't perfect? Neil hadn't known that Todd wasn't an innocent baby who couldn't protect himself until Todd made him realize it. Was it Neil's turn? Or *did* Todd know that? He had been reading *The Great Gatsby* on his lonesome the other day. So, at the least, he was speaking from what he thought was his own reality. Maybe Todd hadn't broken out of his own Gatsby effect. Neil would never know unless he asked.

"What about me?" Neil asked slowly, and every word that came out of his mouth made him regret encouraging the next. "What is it about me that you like?"

"What? Do you want me to name a bunch of traits?" Todd asked him, irritated. Neil's heart sort of broke. That is exactly how he had acted when Todd accused him of not seeing him for who he really was. Neil took a breath, but didn't say anything as to let Todd continue. "I shouldn't have to list all that to you."

"I need you to," Neil said, "I really need you to."

"Could you answer if I asked you that?"

Neil went silent. Yes. He thought he could. However, the second he debated it, nothing came to mind. There were tons of reasons he liked Todd, but while he was having this crisis, all he could think about was how good it felt to feel needed. To protect Todd when he needed it. God, that was wrong. He didn't really like Todd because of all that, did he? No. He liked Todd because of who he was. He liked Todd because he was passionate about what he did and he was kind and he was clumsy in an adorable way, but the fact that that wasn't what came to his mind first... "I guess not."

"See?" Todd asked, "All you need to know is that there isn't anything to make you hate yourself so much."

"I feel like I only see you when I'm having a breakdown," Neil said, and he didn't know why, but he was breathing normally now. He was realizing he wasn't okay, and maybe it was pretending to be okay that was making *not* being okay so difficult to deal with. His mom always used to tell him, in secret of course, that crying was a good thing. It was better you cried when your heart wanted rather than when your body wanted. If your mind and heart went against your body, your body would take things into its own hands. Neil knew that much. He'd

been resisting not being okay for so long. He had always thought that no one who wasn't okay could do anything successful, but hey, he'd been *totally horrible* this whole time and he'd passed his math quiz last week. That was something. Something that made him calm down, breath, start feeling the surroundings around him again—and to feel that he definitely *wasn't* wearing a towel. "Or when I'm naked."

"Please don't say that," Todd responded quickly, and Neil was glad to see him smile.

"I'm not the one standing in a shower fully clothed," Neil responded, and he reached behind him as slyly as he could, but Todd stopped him.

"Don't even think about turning that handle, Neil Perry," He said, "That is *not* what I deserve after talking you down."

Neil did, in fact, keep thinking about turning the handle. He couldn't keep from Todd what he was doing, however, so he just decided to make it more obvious. "I would say it was more like talking me sideways. I'm having a breakdown, Todd."

"I noticed," Todd said, and it was in a warning tone. "Don't. Even. Think. About. It."

"Unfortunately, I don't stop thinking." Neil turned the handle very harshly and flipped him and Todd's positions so *Todd* was getting soaked in water. Todd was *enraged* and all Neil could do was laugh. He felt like he was crazy. Like it wasn't possible that five minutes ago he had almost painfully marked his skin and now he was cackling at his best friend stomping toward him like an angry cartoon character. Everything felt like such a mess, but all he could do was embrace it. It was probably only a few more moments before everything came crashing down and he would forget how to be happy again. "Come on, Toddsie, calm down. When's the last time we had fun? When we weren't fighting?"

"You always come full circle in the messiest way." Todd wiped water from his eyes and viciously whipped it to the ground. "I believe that's what Charlie came to talk to you about."

"Really?"

"Yeah. About how stupid you are."

"Does Charlie transcribe our conversations?"

"He has a good memory."

"I find that hard to believe," Neil said, and he was stopped short from making any more comments about Charlie's stupidity as Todd started peeling his clothes off. "Oh. All I have to do to make you undress is piss you off?"

"Ha. Ha." Todd threw his clothes to the side. "Not exactly."

"Can I have a few different ways, then? Cause this is all that has worked out for me so far."

"I don't really think you've earned them," Todd said, "You and I both know this is temporary. When *was* the last time we had fun? Without the weird weight of knowing we like each other?"

"I think you just said it," Neil said, "Before we knew we liked each other."

"Yeah. It's stressful," Todd admitted, "Really, really, stressful."

"Yeah," Neil agreed, "Which is why you forget about it all the time, right?" Neil was surprised at his own willpower to keep his eyes in an appropriate place, but he figured the only thing that could make this situation worse was staring directly at Todd's dick.

"Precisely."

"How did you do this for two years?" Neil asked.

"You didn't know."

"Fair," Neil said, "So maybe we should have fun?"

"I am undressed, aren't I?"

It was hard for Neil to be too worried about anything anymore when he was having fun with Todd, and he hadn't felt that way since sixth grade. Since they were two little boys sitting in the audience for *Bye Bye Birdie.* Neil probably hadn't let himself go for his entire freshman year, but now he was filling his mouth up with as much water as it could hold and spitting it in Todd's direction while Todd tried to figure out how to reciprocate the attack without being as gross. He eventually found his revenge in a left-behind, empty shampoo bottle, which he proceeded to fill with water and spray at Neil. The quick-wit impressed Neil and he had no appropriate way to defend himself

anymore, so he just decided to attempt to charge at Todd and bring him to the ground in order to steal his weapon. All in all, *not* a good idea in a shower. He slipped almost immediately and *ate shit*.

Evidently, no bones were broken, so Todd laughed heartily and continued spraying Neil with water. It was even harder to defend himself when Todd had such a high-ground, so Neil let himself be choked with water streams upon water streams just to hear Todd cackle with the arrogance of a selfish champion. After he felt sufficed in the amount of water that he had sent down Neil's lungs, Todd helped Neil up and set the deadly shampoo bottle aside. He was still smiling, still laughing, and in that moment there was no way Neil could believe he ever had the wrong perception of Todd, but he knew better than to doubt the consequences of the Gatsby effect. For then, however, as Todd threw a towel and some clothes at him, he let himself be fooled. He let Todd drag them back to their room, and he let Todd continue to be excited.

He only felt a slight amount of dread when Todd pulled Pitts and Meeks' radio from their wardrobe. After tussling his hair within his towel and deciding it wouldn't dry his hair well enough to lay down, Neil threw the towel as efficiently at Todd as he could to prevent him from approaching with the radio. It didn't work. Todd dismissed this hostile attack and shoved Neil down on his bed before sitting down next to him. "I was waiting to show you something." Todd played with knobs-a-plenty and Neil was convinced Meeks or Pitts had taught him how to work that thing. "God, my dad would *hate* this."

Todd looked up at him for a quick second and Neil gave him a sly smile. "Good."

Neil was impressed at Pitts and Meeks' improved abilities, hearing a different song on every single channel Todd shifted through. No static and only *one* station was playing *Love Potion No. 9.* All of the additional quirks made Neil believe even further there was no way Todd could maneuver about this technology without their assistance. The fact it took well over five minutes for Todd to find what he was looking for proved this point for him.

"Where is it? HA!" Todd went from aggravated to celebrating in two seconds, clicking to a certain station and turning the volume up as loud as he could without getting them caught. After that, he shoved the radio far from him so he couldn't mess anything up. Neil wasn't sure what he heard because Todd had started rambling above the song he had been so proud to finally find. "We saw him on the TV over

Spring Break. Jeff and Dad hated it, and my mom wouldn't let me keep watching with her. You won't believe it, Neil."

Neil leant his ear closer to the radio and started listening to what was playing. He understood almost instantly why Mr. Anderson and his son were enraged that their family had been in this presence of this. Elvis Presley was playing on the radio. Neil's dad hated him too, but his mom stayed up and watched his TV performances. Neil watched secretly from the stairs. Anything that made his father mad, he was interested in. *Especially* if he wasn't the one doing it. That made it more likely that he could actually continue to enjoy whatever it was. The fact that Todd and him shared this made Neil smile. To show this to Todd, he asked, "Elvis Presley?"

"He piss your dad off too?" Todd asked excitedly, "My dad *hates* him."

"Why do you think that is?"

"His hair is girly," Todd said simply and dared to turn the radio up a little bit more. "And just *listen*." Neil allowed himself to be drawn in by Elvis' voice. He had heard bad things about Elvis, of course. Mostly homophobic and racist things, and the only thing that concerned him about that was that Elvis was white and he seemed to be stealing from a culture that wasn't his. Other than that, Neil didn't mind Elvis, and listening to the grit along with breaths that didn't need to be taken made him *really* not mind Elvis. Todd stared at him like *see, now you get it,* and Neil refused to say anything out loud. Todd got up, his wet hair sliding up the side of Neil's arm and making it slimy with the grease that had leaked out of his hair from the impromptu wash. There was nothing that like art really made Todd not care about anything except being himself. Poetry, music, you name it. Neil sometimes thought Todd was really only himself during times like this.

There were a few heavy beats played in sequence that Todd jutted his shoulders up and down to, so Neil wasn't surprised when he started singing. "*I never looked for trouble.*" Todd would not let up on his shoulders staying with the beat. "*But I never ran."* Neil couldn't help but stare at Todd as he mocked precisely what about Elvis' voice made it so attractive. Todd grabbed Neil's hands and dragged him back up off the bed, still in beat with the song. "*But if you're gonna start a rumble, don't you try it out alone.*"

Dancing with Todd to *Trouble* by Elvis Presley was not what Neil thought was going to happen after Todd caught him about to cut

himself open in the shower, but he didn't really know what to expect from anything anymore. Maybe in the next few minutes they would be screaming at each other again, but Neil didn't really think so. Something about this had been relieving and had leaked out some of his stress. He was good for a day at least, but he knew Todd wouldn't forget their argument. There was no way the consequence for tonight was going to be having a good time with Todd. It was a temporary solution to deal with the bad here and now so that they could deal with the bad there and then in a more long-term way. A way Todd would now have time to think up while he thought Neil wasn't suspecting him in the slightest. This all went through Neil's mind in a moment, and then he pushed it away and let himself enjoy what was going on.

They had to have been making a bunch of sound, but no one came to check on them. It was truly like the two were in their own little world, but when Todd spun Neil and stopped him halfway through, the orbit of their world stopped, and Neil broke out of it. Todd wasn't standing directly behind him, but Neil felt as if there was zero space between them. Todd reached out and rubbed his fingers against the back of Neil's neck, and Neil had no idea why he did so until Todd's hands were in front of his face, his fingertips glazed in blood. Neil's hand shot back to his neck as if he needed to feel the blood on his own hands to confirm it was really there.

"Your scar from Charlie," Todd said, "It must have opened again when you fell in the shower."

"Or I just got cut in the exact same place," Neil argued, "That scar is like... five years old."

"Either way," Todd shrugged and rubbed Neil's blood off on the towel Neil had discarded on the bed.

Neil followed in suit. "Great. I'm going to have a scar on top of a scar."

"It'll have good memories," Todd said and picked up the towel after Neil had finished wiping his hand off on it. Neil was starting to get concerned about how his neck had to have been bleeding this entire time, and Todd seemed to mimic this train of thought, reaching back and pressing the towel to the back of Neil's neck to stop the blood flow. His head was right below Neil's own, so when he lifted it to speak, their faces were closer than ever.

"Hi," Neil said at the proximity.

But Todd only repeated, "*Good* memories."

"Yeah?" Neil prompted.

"Yeah," Todd confirmed, adding more pressure to the towel pressed against Neil's neck and looking at him with an undecipherable stare. "Like scars are supposed to."

Chapter End Notes

.... you guys are not going to like me in the next chapter LMAO. i hope you enjoyed this one bc i sure didnt!!

also: did i just watch elvis in theatres? yes. austin butler is really hot, but i promise i do not condone most of elvis' life decisions

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!